BODY MATTERS: GARY SNYDER, THE SELF AND ECOPOETICS

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Gary Snyder has offered, in poems and essays, ways to acknowledge the interrelationships of humans with the more-than-human. He questions common notions of selfness as well as understandings of what it is to be human in relationship to other species and ecosystems, and he offers new paradigms for the relationship between cultures and the ecosystems in which these cultures reside. These new paradigms are rooted in a reevaluation of our attitudes toward our physical bodies which impacts our relationship to the earth and raises new possibilities for an ecological spirituality or philosophy. The sum of Snyder's endeavors is a foundation for an understanding of ecopoetics.

Snyder's poem "The Trail is Not a Trail" is an interesting place to begin examining how human perceptions of the self are central to the kinds of relationships that humans believe are possible between our species and everything else. In this poem there is a curious fusion of the speaker and the trail. In fact, with each successive line they become increasingly difficult to separate. The physical self is central to Snyder's poetry because his is a poetry of the self physically rooted in ever-shifting relationship with the biosphere.

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CHAPTER ONE

EMPTINESS AND FORM: THEY TASTE GREAT TOGETHER!

In his poetry and essays, Gary Snyder has offered ways to acknowledge interrelationships based upon his explorations of personal interrelationships with (as David Abram puts it) the "more-than-human." His works call into question previous notions of selfness as well as understandings of what it is to be human. I will be exploring his work in the next several chapters and will demonstrate the type of paradigm shifts this work represents for our culture. Each of the following chapters will focus on concepts of selfness and how such notions are challenged by ecologically oriented poetry and altered by changing paradigms in ecology. The chapters will likely not follow a linear sequence, but will loop back through familiar ground, although from different vantage points, namely specific poems, with brief excursions into other areas such as Buddhism and Christian Mysticism.

The way in which we understand selfness, or what it means to be an individual being, is crucial to our understanding of the world in which we live. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that the way we describe our relationship as humans to the rest of the Earth has an enormous impact on the web of ecosystems that make up the biosphere. Our understanding of the individual self in relation with other human selves may actually parallel our understanding of ourselves as a species in relation with other species. If we do not recognize the delicate interrelationships that enable us to live in a community, the

community will fail. The same is true in the biological community, but even our notions of biological community will likely have to expand beyond plants and animals to recognizing seemingly inanimate members such as rocks or to ecosystems as "discrete" entities.

We can no longer ignore the impact we have had on the earth and the relationships which are vital to the biosphere. John Firor, in *The Changing Atmosphere: A Global Challenge*, calls for alternate definitions of what it means to be human which would include acknowledging interrelationship with the Earth. In his book he surveys three large-scale impacts on the biosphere: Acid Rain, Stratospheric Ozone, and Climate Heating. While he asserts that at this point it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that the human species is responsible for these atmospheric changes, he concludes that there is enough reason to believe that in fact we *are* responsible for them:

> To an increasing degree, people are no longer just one out of the millions of species interacting with the atmosphere. There are now so many of us, and each of us on the average wields so much power, that our influence on the whole global system is easily measured. . . . Any discussion of the atmosphere today must treat this new and growing force [the human species] that acts on the air: it must consider the human characteristics that cause us to rush into unknown and threatening changes, and it must search for realistic courses of action that will avoid pushing us into a far less than desirable future. (4-5)

His solution to the problems we are facing on a global ecological level is to re-examine

our understanding of what it means to be human: "Continued expansion, with its accompanying trust in technological solutions, is firmly established as our custom; any change would require major and continuing efforts on the part of world leaders in many fields and the development of a widely held, alternative definition of what it means to be a human on earth" (125). Firor finds that the roots of the current ecological crisis are located in the worldviews held by our current cultures. So, to develop an "alternative definition of what it means to be human on earth" is to explore new ways of describing the relationships between the human and the more-than-human. Relationships will come up often in the next few chapters, because it seems that relationships between human "selves" and the environment are linked to conceptions we may have of relationships between one human "self" and another, and even linked to distinctions we may make between our "selves" and our bodies.

In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts explores what may be the fundamental paradox of human experience currently:

> Our problem is that the power of thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves. This includes the ability to make a symbol, an idea of ourselves apart from ourselves. Because the idea is so much more comprehensible than the reality, the symbol so much more stable than the fact, we learn to identify ourselves with our idea of ourselves. Hence the subjective feeling of a "self" which "has" a mind, of an inwardly isolated subject to whom experiences involuntarily happen. With its characteristic emphasis on the concrete, Zen points out that our

> precious "self" is just an idea, useful and legitimate enough if seen for what it is, but disastrous if identified with our real nature. The unnatural awkwardness of a certain type of self-consciousness comes into being when we are aware of conflict or contrast between the idea of ourselves, on the one hand, and the immediate, concrete feeling of ourselves, on the other. (120-121)

Watts points out the interesting condition which occurs when we try to explain the idea of the autonomous Self. He refers several times to such concepts as "real nature" in his explanation of selfness, which to postmodern ears may sound like fingernails on a chalkboard. However, it is clear that he questions the ability of humans to contact "reality" except by subjective experience, or a "concrete feeling of ourselves." A physical body experiences and perceives the surrounding world, and at the moment of experience there is no self-consciousness. Self-consciousness follows when the human brain begins to process and categorize the sensory data as received from an outside source or other.

From the Buddhist perspective, the notion of an autonomous self is the greatest illusion that must be recognized and discarded on the way to enlightenment. The Buddhist traditions have a very interesting understanding of the self. The Buddha taught the concept known as dependent co-arising, which is the idea that nothing exists independently from anything else, or that all phenomena have an interdependent nature. This is linked to his teaching that "the source of suffering is a false belief in permanence and the existence of separate selves" (Hanh, *Old Path* 116). His enlightenment centered on an expansion of his understanding of the self. The Buddha describes the five skandhas,

or the "five aggregates of all physical and mental elements in the phenomenal world: form (matter), feeling, perception, impulses or volition, and consciousness" (Dogen 284). Tanahashi, in his translation of sections from Dogen's *Shobogenzo* (*Moon in a Dewdrop*), explains: "What is commonly seen as a self is explained as an interdependent combining of these elements, not a fixed entity performing various functions" (284). When notions of an independent self are removed, distinctions between the human and non-human at least go through a profound change, if indeed they do not disappear altogether. The Buddha recognized that all things are empty of a permanent and independent self, which is known as emptiness, or "the nonseparate nature of all things" (279). All things do have form, but this form does not and could not exist independently or apart from all other things. The human "self" has a body, but, according to Buddha, liberation comes from realizing that the body is composed of matter through processes that are dependent upon all other things. Each of us has an individual form, but we are "empty" of a separate self.

In *Being Peace*, Thich Nhat Hanh gives an example of self-emptiness from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It is impossible to point to any one thing that does not have a relationship to the sheet of paper that this sentence is printed on:

> So we say, "A sheet of paper is made of non-paper elements." A cloud is a non-paper element. The forest is a non-paper element. Sunshine is a non-paper element. The paper is made of all the non-paper elements to the extent that if we return the non-paper elements to their sources, the cloud to the sky, the sunshine to the sun, the logger to his father, the paper is

> empty. Empty of what? Empty of a separate self . . . Empty, in this sense means that the paper is full of everything, the entire cosmos . . . In the same way, the individual is made of non-individual elements.

It is interesting that several thousand years later, the same realizations about the interdependence of all things and similar challenges to notions of the independent self have become central to discussions of physics and ecosystem theory. Scholars and authors such as Frijtof Capra, Neil Evernden and David Abram have been exploring the crucial connections between our understanding of interrelationships in physics, ecology, and phenomenology. These studies have direct relevance to Snyder's poetic endeavors.

In chapter two, I focus on Gary Snyder's poem "The Trail is Not a Trail," and begin with a close reading of the poem, paying particular attention to how Snyder uses language to explore notions of the relation of self to the environment, as well as how he works with the spatial construct of openness. I follow this examination of the poem with an exploration of trail-ness, or the condition of being a trail, a path, a highway, etc. A close look at some of the connotations surrounding different "roads" reveals important psychological distinctions that seem to play a part in literal and figurative travel. Here I also draw connections between Snyder's "Trail" and a passage from Chuang Tzu's "Discussion on Making All Things Equal." In chapter two I explore the following questions:

- What makes a trail? What makes a road? What is the road made with or of? What kinds of paths are there?

- How does “path” operate as a metaphor?
- What are the distinctions between the kinds of paths: ant trails, deer paths in the woods, cow paths in pastures, hiking trails, country dirt roads, two-lane fm roads, state highways, interstate highways, Los Angeles interchanges? What are they for, why were they “made”? Who or what made them? Who are they made for?
- When creatures follow these trails where are they going? Where are they NOT going? What happens when trails become ruts, which inhibit free movement, rather than just being a way to get from point A to point B?
- How important are beginnings and endings on trails? Is there really a beginning? An ending?
- How is perception/interpretation altered by different understandings of trails?

Snyder has elsewhere written works directly relating to the notion of trailness, which will also enter the discussion (such as the poem “Off the Trail” and the essay “On the Path, Off the Trail” in *The Practice of the Wild*.). In addition, I will examine how this poem connects with Lew Welch’s poem “Hiking/High Sierra” and with what could be called the Walking tradition in American literature, specifically Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” and Muir’s *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*.

At this point I will continue the exploration of the notion of self that comes up in the poem “The Trail is Not a Trail,” as it relates to some of the recent discussions of animism in ecological studies, which is connected to Buddhist notions of self. The chapter concludes with my attempt to situate this poem within the shifting notions of

frontier or open spaces, particularly the ways in which the paradigm of openness has been applied to the physical land of the New World. This is a continuation of a look at the relationship between the speaker of the poem and the environment within the poem. If the speaker and the trail become indistinguishable (fused), then what happens when the trail fades away? Or, to return to the original question, if the trail is not a trail, then what is it?

Chapters three and four are companion pieces, since each looks at the peculiar situation in which we as humans have found ourselves regarding the connections we acknowledge (or do not acknowledge) between our *selves* (whatever those may be), our *physical bodies*, and the "more-than-human" (or the biosphere, which includes all life forms but also all other things that make life possible, such as rocks, dirt, water, and air). Chapter three will focus on how Snyder's poetry illustrates the importance of such connections, while chapter four will examine these connections as they relate to mystical experience.

The focus of chapter three is the importance of recognizing the physical aspects of the self. Poet Michael McClure, who shares with Snyder a sense of the importance of the physical body to human experience, explains the drive behind his poetic endeavors in his discussion of "Point Lobos: Animism:"

> I wanted to tell of my feelings of hunger, of emptiness, and of epiphany. I hoped to state the sharpness of a demonic joy that I found in a place of incredible beauty on the coast of Northern California. I wanted to say how I was overwhelmed by the sense of animism--and how everything (breath, spot, rock, ripple in the tidepool, cloud, and stone) was alive and spirited.

> It was a frightening and joyous awareness of my undersoul. I say *undersoul* because I did not want to join Nature by my mind but by my viscera--my belly. (26)

McClure desires to "join Nature" in a manner that is a step beyond traditional transcendentalism, which uses non-human nature as a stepping stone to supernatural awareness. Rather, McClure finds that there is a meaningful connection between the body and the non-human, while acknowledging a connection between mind and body, mind and matter. This connection is omnipresent in Snyder's poetry, as it is a poetry grounded in actual physical experience. His poem "The Bath"—discussed in chapter three—is a striking example in which he explores the physical relationship he has with his family.

David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, asks his readers to acknowledge the notion "I am this body," which roots any notions of selfness in a physical form. Yet, to acknowledge that the physical body is intertwined with who we are is not as limiting as some would imagine:

> To acknowledge that "I am this body" is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my "self" to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form. It is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object, for as we shall see, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. (46)

Abrams, like Evernden, questions the boundaries that are often associated with notions of

the physical body, and, as Evernden points out (and as I discuss in chapter three), when notions of the solidity of the boundaries of the self are questioned, traditional understandings of selfness are, if not undermined, drastically altered. Anticipating the anxiety aroused by such an expansion of self-identity, Abram reminds his readers that

> . . . these mortal limits in no way close me off from the things around me or render my relations to them wholly predictable and determinate. On the contrary, my finite bodily presence alone is what enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives. Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things. (47)

The experiencing self is central to Abram's discussion, as it is in phenomenology, and the sensing body is a vital element in such experiences. Abram also takes this notion one step further when he suggests that our sensory experiences could be described as the earth experiencing itself through us:

> Clearly, a wholly immaterial mind could neither see things nor touch things--indeed, could not experience anything at all. *We* can experience things--can touch, hear, and taste things--only because, as bodies, we ourselves are entirely part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us. (68)

This also relates to new visions of organisms that have come out of studies in the Gaia hypothesis, in which humans could be considered as organs of or parasites on the super-

organism, Earth. I will examine here the way in which Snyder playfully (yet meaningfully) acknowledges the physical nature of our self-ness in his poetry.

In chapter four, I will continue the exploration of the connections of self, the body and the cosmos begun in chapter three. I will consider the relation of mysticism to poetry and ecology. Poetry has a strong link to mysticism, especially in relation to the occurrence of fusion, or a merging of two (or more) elements. In mystical poetry this fusion often occurs between the poet or persona and a spiritual figure, such as God or Buddha. Transcendental poetry also at times includes a "mystical" fusion of the poet/persona with nature, which replaces the spiritual figure or is a representation of that figure.

There is a strong tradition in "America" of nature writing, which has resurfaced on occasion from early New World propaganda writings to Colonial Puritan sermons and poetry, to the Nineteenth century romantic movement, to the Beat/San Francisco movement in poetry, to current ecocriticism and environmental ethics. This tradition has made use of the non-human portion of the earth in a variety of ways, but most often in metaphoric constructs: land as woman (to be raped or taken), nature as representation of fallen human condition, nature as transcendental vehicle, nature as site of mystical experience, and nature as forgotten part of human-ness, to name a few. These metaphors describe the vision we have had of the non-human over the past five hundred years (at least), and metaphor is the way humans make sense of the universe. Therefore, if the nature metaphors can be changed or manipulated, the sense of the universe is meaningfully altered.

Also in chapter four I introduce the concept ecomysticism, by which I mean the

space where “new” ecological paradigms and mystical “understandings” of the world overlap. I think I see such a space there, especially in the poetry of Gary Snyder, although there are many other poets who are exploring this spiritual terrain. Such a vision, in fact, is not limited to poets who are noticeably “green,” but includes poets who use natural imagery in poetry that is mystically oriented. The ecological revolutions of the past few decades have likewise not been limited to changes in scientific understanding, but have resulted in shifting paradigms in many areas, such as literary criticism, Christian theology, philosophy/ethics, economics, and politics.

After considering various traditions of mysticism, I then explore how these understandings of mysticism fit in with ecology, which, following the postmodern trend, does not necessarily include a belief in “ultimate reality” or any sort of supernatural deity. It seems that a new understanding of mysticism may need to be developed, possibly in conjunction with the development of the term ecomysticism, which would emphasize the interrelatedness or interconnectedness of all matter, the human and the more-than-human. In this exploration, I work with texts (poetry and prose) by Snyder in which it is clear that he is recounting as poet-shaman mystical experience that is spiritual, yet very much of this earth.

In the fifth and final chapter, I return to some of the original questions about selfness and the interrelation of the self, the body, the biosphere, and the cosmos. I hope to develop a sense of what may be involved with ecopoetics, or a poetics of ecology, which encompasses the attempts by poets using form and content to challenge cultural paradigms of the ecosystem. Such a challenge to this cultural paradigm corresponds

directly to the need for humans to develop new understandings of what it means to be a human in relationship with the more-than-human.

I begin by tracing this idea from William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," all the way up to the 1999 publication of *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, by Leonard Scigaj. Though there has not been much written in this area, some solid, important preliminary scholarship has appeared. I then review some of Snyder's ecopoetical writing, both prose and poetry, in order to get an impression of how the relationship between poetry and ecology has been worked out in his approach to poetry.

Although chapters two through four do not make reference to ecopoetics, each establishes an important facet of a good working definition of ecopoetics, or a poetics in which the form and content of the poem draw attention to new understandings of the human self. Ecopoetry does this by (1) examining the barriers our culture describes as existing between the human self and the environment; (2) reclaiming the body as integral to "real" human experience, giving the natural equality with the supernatural, and in fact, even challenging that dichotomy; (3) recounting the experience of ecomystical fusion, or those moments when the notion of the physical self as distinct from the non-human is eliminated on physical and spiritual levels—those moments when the spiritual impact of the physical notion of interrelatedness is most clear. This definition works well with the approach that I see Snyder taking to the marriage of ecology and poetry. However, in the end, ecopoetics will never be anything more than a convenient word for an infinite variety of ways in which poets envision the relationship of the ecosystem to human

consciousness and human bodies as expressed in poetic language. Perhaps it will function best as Cheryll Glotfelty suggests ecocriticism could work, as a useful keyword for searching databases. But, as she also has stated of ecocriticism, ecopoetics will always have "one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (xix).

Examining the body in relation to our understanding of what it is to be a human self is one way in which we can see that our bodies *matter*. We experience everything through our bodies, yet we can at times become intensely aware that we are more than our bodies on an ecological level. Each of us has a definite form, yet we are spiritually and physically empty of a self that is independent of Earth.

CHAPTER TWO

IF THE TRAIL IS NOT A TRAIL, THEN WHAT IS IT?

A road is made by people walking on it.

--Chuang Tzu

Trails go nowhere.

They end exactly

Where you stop.

--Lew Welch, "Hiking / High Sierra"

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.

--Charles Olson, "Call Me Ishmael"

From ecological footprints to the high-impact path, metaphors of walking and trails abound in environmental literature circles. Perhaps these are akin to the scenario Snyder refers to in his poem "Axe Handles," which is an allusion to the Shih Ching poem about, among other things, shaping axe handles: "Shape a handle, shape a handle. / the pattern is not far off" (*Axe Handles* vii). Eco-savvy writers need look no further for metaphors than a trail through the wild. This metaphor also fits within the schema for the life-is-a-journey metaphor discussed at length by Lakoff and Turner. This metaphor has found its way into poetry countless times, and in the second half of the Twentieth

Century quite a few poets have continued the tradition—established by the likes of Wordsworth and Thoreau—of bringing walking and trail experience into their work. These works describe the relationship between the speakers in the poems and the trails or places off the trails. Especially in Gary Snyder's poem "The Trail is Not a Trail" there is a breakdown in distinctions between the speaker and the surroundings, both while the speaker is on and off the trail. The concept of the independent self—or lack thereof—is one point of interest in this poem and others. After a close look at these poems, it becomes clear that whether on the trail or off the trail, there is a way to reach an awareness of interdependence with the larger ecosystem: *who* you are is to a large extent defined by *where* you are. This type of awareness is also parallel to the individual's awareness of culture and thus to the individual's awareness of the spiritual/metaphysical dimension of life.

Trails appear with an unsurprising regularity in the poetry of Gary Snyder, since his subject is often the netting that binds Gaia into a cohesive living entity, not to mention his years spent working on a trail crew. Many poets have written about walking trips and paths, but while often such poems invite a departure from the physical to the metaphysical—Thoreau's poem "The Old Marlborough Road" in his essay "Walking," for example—Snyder's poems do not stray far from the physicality of being on, or off, the trail. "Riprap," for instance, is a poem about poetry, but the cobble of words is not only metaphorically laid down "before the mind like rocks" but also "placed solid, by hands / . . . set / before the body of the mind / in space and time" (*Riprap* 32). The last eight lines show that the poet is using the physical as metaphor for thoughts:

ants and pebbles

In the thin loam, each rock a word

a creek-washed stone

Granite: ingrained

with a torment of fire and weight

Crystal and sediment linked hot

all change, in thoughts,

As well as things. (18-25)

Yet, the fact that the poem itself ends with the things rather than the thoughts seems to point back to the necessity of having a physical mind and a physical body in order to think these thoughts that are changing. In fact, the poem reminds us that a poem is a physical artifact—whether it is spoken, sung, or read on a page—as well as an event: there is a relationship between the ideas of poetry and our physical bodies and a relationship between these ideas and the earth itself. This is perhaps Snyder's twist on Williams' "no ideas but in things."

In this chapter I discuss three situations that can arise for a traveler: following the trail, experiencing the trail, and leaving the trail. Simply put, following the trail is linear travel from point A to point B. This will be the focus of the "On the Trail" segment of this chapter. Leaving the trail is the condition that arises when the traveler finds herself either choosing or being forced to travel where there are no designated paths. This is the subject of "Openness." Between these two extremes is experiencing the trail, which is a type of path following where the traveler's awareness is not limited to the trail. Rather,

her focus will shift from the trail to things that are off the trail. This will be discussed in "Walking." As suggested above, these scenarios concerning trails in general, operate simultaneously on literal and figurative levels for Snyder and most "trail poets." These scenarios also overlap in some ways that make it easier to approach a discussion of them that is similar to Neil Evernden's spiral style of writing. In other words, though each of these three scenarios has a separate section devoted to it, it is impossible to discuss one without mentioning the other two.

On the Trail: Point A to Point B

If "Riprap" is a poem that blurs the line between rocks and poetry, Snyder's "The Trail Is Not a Trail" makes it a bit difficult to distinguish between the speaker and the trail, and ultimately the speaker and the rocks:

> I drove down the Freeway
> And turned off at an exit
> And went along a highway
> Til it came to a sideroad
> Drove up the sideroad
> Til it turned to a dirt road
> Full of bumps, and stopped.
> Walked up a trail
> But the trail got rough
> And it faded away—
> Out in the open,

Everywhere to go. (*Left Out in the Rain* 127)

Although it is written in one stanza, this poem may be broken into three sections based on "hard" punctuation (two periods and a dash). The first sentence, which takes up seven lines, is peculiar because the subject of the sentence is constantly changing. The subject of the first three lines seems to be the speaker, "I." In the fourth line the subject becomes "it," and since it seems logical to attach this "it" to the preceding noun, the subject becomes "highway." But immediately in the fifth line, the subject seems to revert to "I," since the verb "drove" cannot normally be linked with the subject "highway." In the sixth line, "it" shows up again in reference to "sideroad." In the next line the sideroad turns into a "dirt road." This causes an interesting ambiguity moving from the sixth to the seventh line, in which the sideroad has "turned to a dirt road/Full of bumps, and stopped." The dirt road is without a doubt connected to the description "full of bumps" but what is it that has stopped? The dirt road may have become the subject, but it may have been the sideroad, which has turned to a dirt road. Or perhaps the speaker has stopped. Maybe all three? It is not clear what has stopped, and though there are several options, it seems that one answer to the question could be that the speaking subject has fused or has "become one with" the highway/sideroad/dirt-road. If this is the case, in what ways can it be said that the speaker and road have—or have been already—fused?

The second section is not so ambiguous, though the reader may have to supply the first subject. Since "I" seems to fit without much difficulty, it seems that the speaker is at this point walking up a trail that gets rough and fades away. Up to this point all of the verbs have been in the past-tense. In the last section, the last two lines, suddenly there is

no more explicit subject and there is no more verb tense—they vanish. If we fill in the missing parts for the last two lines, we could have something like: [Since I am] "Out in the open, / [there is] Everywhere to go." However, applying subject and tense to the last sentence is problematic, since it is likely that there was a good reason to leave them out. One reason could be that this allows for the speaker, and perhaps the reader, to "become one with" or indistinguishable from her surroundings.

This chapter began with a quote from Chuang Tzu: "A road is made by people walking on it." This is from Burton Watson's translation, and the immediate context seems to be an explanation of what can happen when a culture begins to define reality; that is, when a group of people decide what is and what is not: "What is acceptable we call acceptable; what is unacceptable we call unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not so" (35-36). Another translation: "Things can be acceptable by our saying that they 'can' be acceptable; they can not be acceptable by our saying that they 'can not' be acceptable. The tao [sic] of things, we walk it and it is formed; things we call them so and they are so" (Wu 141). The act of naming or calling, whether on an individual or cultural level, has the power to create reality. Just as a path establishes a route through otherwise "wild" territory, traditions are established as methods by which any given culture can continue into the next generation. You can be sure that when you are following a trail, you are following a leader. In other words, someone or something has been there before you. Culturally, this happens on a wider scale as successive generations are "trained" in the

"proper" ways of going about things. Even in Ken Kesey's counterculture experiment described in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, group mentality is at work:

> "There are going to be times," says Kesey, "when we can't wait for somebody. Now, you're either on the bus or off the bus. If you're on the bus, and you get left behind, then you'll find it again. If you're off the bus in the first place—then it won't make a damn." And nobody had to have it spelled out for them. Everything was becoming allegorical, understood by the group mind, and especially this: "You're either on the bus . . . or off the bus." (Wolfe 74)

On the bus, off the bus; on the trail, off the trail. These metaphors in this case represent being (or not being) a part of the "group mind" or the dominant social paradigm. In a sense the paths in "The Trail is Not a Trail" follow a reverse chronological order: once there was no trail, then there was a trail, then there was a dirt road, then there was a larger dirt road (later to be called a side road once freeways were built), then there was a highway and then a freeway. The speaker in the poem can be said to be losing more and more cultural trappings—literally interstate, state and county roads—the further he or she follows the roads from developed to undeveloped areas. By the last two lines, the speaker has reached a place or state of openness. Literally, we have a speaker who begins on a freeway, and taking smaller and smaller paths, winds up at the end of a trail. If the speaker has a destination or purpose, this state at the end seems to be it. If the speaker has no destination or purpose, the place she finds herself in appears to be agreeable, since "open" and "everywhere" are, in a sense, situations without a destination for this traveler.

In fact, if there is no more path to follow, it is likely that any destinations or purposes have been left behind on the trail.

If the poem can be read as in some way adhering to the life-is-a-journey metaphor, it can also be read as a metaphor that could be described as paradigms-are-maps. In fact, anything with a beginning and an ending or anything that operates as a map can be plugged into life-is-a-journey. So the poem describes what could be possible if cultural norms are reversed or at least held in abeyance. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the cultural construction of reality. It is merely a description of how things happen in culture, and if it is possible to make roads, culturally speaking, then it should be possible to find a way to leave those roads, at least temporarily, to see what might be "off the trail." When cultural paradigms are set aside—this may be possible for individuals, but certainly more difficult for an entire culture—a new vision, openness, is waiting. Also, presumably the state of openness could become a new paradigm. Yet, since a paradigm by nature has some sort of boundaries, the openness paradigm is unique, because we have all possibilities of vision available to us, rather than merely substituting a new paradigm for the old paradigm. In fact, this openness could even lead to a non-paradigm. Perhaps, then, this non-paradigm of openness becomes a new type of map for "reality."

During the approach of the year 2000, there was an increase in the number of people who were concerned about finding ways to survive in the event of the feared Y2K predicament. The cover story for the September 1999 issue of *Backpacker* features one of the editors, Ann McGivney, searching for and going through a survival school.

Backpackers want to survive if their costly high-tech gear gets washed downstream, blows off the side of a cliff, or gets taken away by bears or other wild creatures. McGivney's interest parallels the general public's concern over the millennium: "All this talk about Y2K and computers going berserk has me thinking about my dependence on technology and how vulnerable that makes me—not in the city, where ATMs crashing and grocery stores running out of toilet paper are the big techno fears, but in the backcountry" (48). This is a literal concern for backpackers that connects with the concern of people finding themselves "off the trail" in cultural contexts. How would a culture handle having its paradigms washed away? Of course one would be more likely to meet an individual who has found that these cultural paradigms have washed away on a personal level, rather than mass paradigm loss in larger groups, since groups tend to give cohesion to accepted paradigms. Would the reaction to openness be confusion? Fear? Enlightenment? Paralysis?

One of the survival schools mentioned in McGivney's article is Tom Brown's Tracking, Nature, Wilderness, and Survival School. Tom Brown, a. k. a. "The Tracker," was trained in the art of tracking by an Apache elder, Grandfather. Crucial to Brown's way of surviving in the wilderness is awareness of what is going on around you:

> Grandfather did not and could not separate the concepts of tracking and awareness. To him, they were both part of the same consciousness. One could not exist or be whole without the other. Awareness without tracking became a shallow experience, where no understanding of the psyche of animals could be achieved nor, for that matter, could the entire fabric of

> nature be comprehended. In fact, the awareness of animals and the life forces of nature would be forever out of reach as well as incomprehensible. Tracking without awareness makes a prison of the trail, where nothing exists outside the trail itself. (7)

This brings us back to the poem's final statement "Out in the open / Everywhere to go." If nothing exists outside the trail or any other path, the speaker would be ready to turn around once reaching the end of the trail, if not before, and if the path represents awareness, what happens when the path disappears? For the speaker, awareness almost seems to become fully realized at the point where the trail ends. It is significant that the directional cues in the poem through line ten have been either "up" or "down." In the third section, the only directional cue is "out." Once the directional cues shift from "up/down" to "out", a condition of openness arises that stands in contrast to the linearity of the trail. However, before this openness can be discussed, the notion of *trailness* should be explored more fully.

Turning to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for some of the history of different types of paths and roads will be useful in establishing the concept of trailness. Starting with what seems to be the least impact, there is *track*, "the line or mark made or path beaten by the feet of man or beast; trace" (XVIII: 338). This type of path is not necessarily one used frequently or even more than once. This could be the track of a frightened animal through thick brush, for example. At a higher level of development than track is *path*:

> a way beaten or trodden by the feet of men or beasts; a track formed incidentally by passage between two places, rather than expressly planned or constructed to accommodate traffic; a narrow unmade and (usually) unenclosed way across the open country, through woods or fields, over a mountain, etc.; a footway or footpath as opposed to a road for vehicles . . . (XI: 337)

So, with *path*, the way is formed by a sort of trampling indicative of regular passage between point A and point B, and the way is to be walked rather than driven. This brings a clear connotation of linearity, as opposed to *track*. There are two points that are traveled regularly enough for a path to be beaten into the earth.

Trail begins to be in use in the Fourteenth Century for "something that trails or hangs trailing." In other words, a trail at this point was something—like a robe or a sled—that dragged along behind someone or something, which in turn must have left a sort of path in its wake, or "a mark left where something has been trailed or has passed along." This also includes a scent that has been left behind that may be "followed by a huntsman or hound, or by any pursuer" (XVIII: 363). With the trail, there is, even more so than with path, the sense that a traveler is directly making a personal mark upon the surface of the earth. Specifically in North America, in the late 1960's, there is also the familiar concept of a trail as "a route through rough country cleared and maintained for recreational walking" (XVIII: 364).

To supplement this understanding of *trail*, there are several government publications that have dealt specifically with the issue of National Trails in the United

States. In 1990, American Trails, a non-profit organization working on the National Trails Agenda Project, submitted this definition of trails to the National Park Service:

> For the purposes of this report, a trail is a linear corridor, on land or water, with protected status and public access for recreation or transportation. Trails can be used to preserve open space, provide a natural respite in urban areas, limit soil erosion in rural areas, and buffer wetlands and wildlife habitat along waterways. Trails may be surfaced with soil, asphalt, sand and clay, clam shells, rock, gravel or wood chips. Trails may follow a river, a ridge line, a mountain game trail, an abandoned logging road, a state highway. They may link historic landmarks within a city. Trails may be maintained by a federal, state, or local agency, a local trails coalition, or a utility company. (*Trails For All Americans* 2)

The National Trails Agenda Project was initiated in 1988 "to look at trail issues and develop recommendations to satisfy America's current and future need for trails" (1). The report explains that trails are a natural resource and should be developed for recreational use and transportation. The idea is to have a nationwide system of trails that will offer such things as paths for alternative modes of transportation (i.e. walking, bicycling), extended hiking opportunities and greenbelt connections between parks and sports facilities. Here is the dream:

> What would it take for all Americans to be able to go out their front doors and within fifteen minutes be on trails that wind through their cities, towns or villages and bring them back without retracing steps? Along the way

> they could pass shops and restaurants, go to work or school or a park, visit an historic site or the zoo, and experience the great outdoors without a car or bus. If they were to follow the right path the trail could take them into the countryside or possibly link up with another trail that would lead them into the deepest wilderness or to the highest mountain or across the widest prairie. They could travel across American on trails that connect one community to another and stretch from coast to coast, and from border to border. (1)

There is something very exciting about the idea of America being accessible by a system of trails, yet there is also something about this endeavor that seems a bit odd. The report mentions that the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission discovered in 1960 that "90 percent of adult Americans enjoyed outdoor activities" (2). This leads the writers of this report to the conclusion that trails are an important thing for the U. S. Government to support legislatively and monetarily. This in turn brings up some complicated issues such as accessibility for the disabled and the matter of who will be responsible for maintenance.

Looking at trails through the eyes of a governmental report is admittedly an unusual perspective for a literary critic, but it points out one way that trails "happen" that is quite different from the birth of the paths of the past. This report lays responsibility on the Government for initiating the construction or renovation of needed trails. However, if the trails were all that necessary, it seems logical that they would appear without much notice, that is, they would start as all trails of the past have started: the ground got

trampled enough by traffic of some sort to be recognizable as a desirable way to get from one place to another. Perhaps it started with deer traveling through a forest from a grazing spot to a water hole (track). Then hunter-gatherers discovered the same path, and thousands of years later we have all the splendor of an interstate interchange, such as the I-10/I-15 interchange in the Los Angeles area. Now some Americans are apparently seeking out paths that are a little less nerve-wracking than the somewhat ironically named freeways found in all metropolitan areas. This seems to be one step in a right direction in light of the current ecological condition, and for all the difficulties that may come with having the National Park Service coordinate trails, this effort may be a sign of a nation-wide attempt to find new ways of living that could just possibly bring us closer to the old ways.

On a higher level than trails, there are roads, highways and freeways. Before the widespread ownership of automobiles, roads and highways were shared by pedestrians, horseback riders, and animal-drawn vehicles; however, today roads, highways and freeways have become restricted to motor vehicles, and, in some enlightened places, bicycles. In fact, many of the interstate highways in the United States no longer allow pedestrians or hitchhikers, and many do not allow bicyclists. These same interstate highways also often have a minimum speed limit of 40 mph with a maximum of 75mph in some states. As can be imagined, this has had a great impact on the experience of travelling from point A to point B. One can also find, if one gets off the main highways, small towns that have been deserted not long after the advent of the interstate system because travelers either no longer had a reason to stop there or were pressing on to the

larger cities (the point B's). The world now floats by as you watch it through the windows of an air-conditioned motorized box on wheels.

To qualify as a trail, literally or metaphorically, there must be a starting place and an ending place. These points are, however, in most cases, relative. But whether or not beginnings and endings can be agreed upon or permanently fixed, there is one element that seems to be important to western notions of trailness: linearity. Trails take you from where you are now to where you want to go: point A to point B.

The linearity of trailness increases with more highly developed trails, i. e., freeways. In most of the United States, when traveling on freeways, it is illegal for a traveler to cross over the median—thus the "For Official Use Only" signs. It is also illegal for a traveler to enter or exit a freeway in any way other than by using designated entrance or exit ramps, unless of course that traveler is a state trooper. The laws pertaining to these situations are of course intended to make the freeways safe for all travelers, but on another level, the inability to turn off the road or U-turn at any point places linear regulations upon path-following that are highly restricted. However, the linearity of freeways is even more marked by the method of construction. There are safety limits to what type of terrain a freeway can pass through or over, such as subterranean caves near the planned surface route, but construction companies have overcome most natural obstacles in order to straighten out the curves if at all possible. The earth is packed and layers of dirt, gravel, cement, and asphalt are steamrolled in a straight line. Bridges, both overpasses and underpasses, and tunnels allow direct travel over or under rivers, gorges, hills, channels, and mountains. Where once a traveler might

have had to travel for days to find a place to ford a river, now the intrepid traveler can pass over the San Francisco Bay—without even seeing the water if the side barriers are built high enough.

Openness: Off the Trail/Out in the open

Storm the reality studio and retake the universe."—William S. Burroughs

In addition to what may be found on the trails, Snyder reminds us that "everything *else* is off the path. The relentless complexity of the world is off to the side of the trail. For hunters and herders trails weren't always so useful. For a forager, the path is *not* where you walk for long . . . For the forager, the beaten path shows nothing new, and one may come home empty handed" (*Practice* 145). One conclusion that can be drawn from "The Trail" is that the walker is "one with" whatever trail or non-trail she happens to be on at the time. The only time that "open" and "everywhere" are a possibility for the speaker is when the trail has disappeared. Perhaps at this point, the trail, if it exists at all, only exists *behind* the traveler, as is suggested by Lew Welch in his poem "Hiking/High Sierra:"

Trails go nowhere.

They end exactly

Where you stop. (23)

If being on the trail presupposes the act of following a leader or "group consciousness," then getting off the trail can be a step toward individual experience or a way of knowing that goes beyond mass methods of education that Snyder refers to as "hearsay." The destination is no longer determined by government, state, or county roads, or by

universities, but is selected moment by moment, step by step. “On the Path, Off the Trail” is how Snyder has put it, or the “actuality of things cannot be confined within so linear an image as a road” (*Practice* 150). In his chapter “Amazing Grace,” Snyder echoes these thoughts:

> The people of precivilized times or places knew their specific watershed ecosystems and mastered those details with beautiful and empirical precision. Natural systems, even in beautiful areas, are of the utmost complexity, and to be understood must be grasped in their wholeness. This means, so to speak, leaving the trail and walking uphill and down, through the brush. The trail is what village people use as a straight line between garden plot and garden plot. Hence, “linear.” The forest, for hunting and gathering people, must be grasped, visualized as a field: “Where do you suppose the deer are moving today?” The Ainu term *iworu*, “field of force,” means simply biome, or territory, but has spirit-world implications as well. (*Place* 96)

No matter how pleasant it is to follow the security of a trail, to “find some ease and comfort in our house, by the hearth, and on the paths nearby” there is also “the tedium of chores and the staleness of repetitive trivial affairs. But the rule of impermanence means that nothing is repeated for long” (*Practice* 154). Even applying trail metaphors to things like “life,” can be misleading, especially if we see the earth and life as being part of an ever-changing phenomenon, along the lines of the Heraclitean worldview. In the chapter quoted from *Practice of the Wild*, Snyder uses path and journey metaphors to describe the

"place" of our work, or field, or our "path in life." For Snyder, one's path in life and one's physical place in life are interwoven, as is clear from his devotion to bioregional ethics.

As a part of his efforts to inhabit the land, rather than live "as a visitor," Snyder has written frequently for *Tree Rings*, which is the newsletter for his home watershed's Yuba Watershed Institute. He brought together two of his essays for *Tree Rings* for his book *A Place in Space* to make a chapter entitled "The Porous World." The first essay, "Crawling," is an account of a crawl that Snyder took with a Bureau of Land Management crew in the 'Innim Community Forest. He contrasts this crawl with a leisurely Thoreauvian walk: "Not hiking or sauntering or strolling, but *crawling*, steady and determined, through the woods" (192). What makes a crawl different from even the most grueling hike? Unlike the occasional climb over a fallen tree on the path, there is "No way to travel off the trail but to dive in: down on your hands and knees on the crunchy manzanita leaf cover and crawl around between trunks . . . Along the ridge a ways, and then down a steep slope through the brush, belly-sliding on snow and leaves like an otter—you get limber at it . . . to go where bears, deer, raccoons, foxes—all the other neighbors—go, you have to be willing to crawl" (193). The idea is to, as he put it, ditch the "hominid pride" and to become comfortable as a quadruped or a snake. If paths exist "off the trail," and Snyder assures us that they do, they are not logical—from our perspective, that is. They follow the needs and ways of "spiders, snakes, ticks (yikes!), little brown birds, lizards, wood rats, mushrooms, and poison-oak vines" (195).

Existence, on this level, is of necessity peaceful coexistence since this is not the domain of humans.

In the second essay, "Living in the Open," the reader is given a glimpse at the philosophy behind Snyder's way of life in the Yuba Watershed:

> One can choose to live in a place as a sort of visitor, or try to become an inhabitant . . . It comes down to how one thinks about screens, fences, or dogs. These are often used for keeping the wild at bay. ("Keeping the wild at bay" sounds like fending off hawks and bears, but it is more often a matter of holding back carpenter ants and deer mice.) (195)

Snyder's home is constructed in such a way that portions of it can be opened to the "elements," making the place fair game for the various creatures of the forest, from wild turkeys and deer to mice and dirt daubers. But, he says, living so that you are literally open to the natural world around you is a great way to enjoy the wonder of the forest as well as a way to be "naturally" attuned to the ways in which you choose to alter the habitat. It may also be that by living in a home that is open to the outdoors provides a fertile mindset for going "past the dichotomy of the wild and the cultivated" (198).

The quest for open space (either to be developed or preserved) has been a growing concern in our development-oriented society (even more so in areas of the world where population explosions have made it an absolute necessity) for more than twenty years. Even in Texas, where everything, including desirable land, is supposedly bigger, communities and metropolitan areas have pondered the issue of "sustainable" growth in light of rapidly shrinking availability of land. Of course, in many cases, this is nothing

but a method by which metropolitan developers can make "suburban sprawl" sound more attractive. In many cases, however, it is clear—even to those who see the earth as a big treasure chest for the human species to use in whatever ways they see fit—that available water and the necessary recharge zones are going to be a major concern in the next thirty years (at least). In 1975 the North Central Texas Council of Governments published guidelines for identifying areas that are critical to watershed preservation, specifically in connection with the development of recreational areas and parks. Their definition of "open space" is interesting because the degree of openness has a direct relationship to the degree to which human activity has been present. They defined open space as "undeveloped or predominantly undeveloped land. More technically it is any area where natural ecological processes are not being disturbed or significantly influenced by human activity" (6). This council of governments is comprised of the fifteen counties surrounding the Dallas/Ft. Worth metropolitan area, including Dallas and Tarrant counties, and it is thus difficult to imagine twenty-five years later that there is much, if any, open space available, if such space is strictly defined as at least not being "significantly influenced." However, this definition does seem to match the openness of "The Trail," because openness seems, for both works, to be physical space that is wild or undeveloped/untamed by humans.

Alternately, "open" can carry such meanings as an aperture, a mouth (as in a river), unconcealed, open space (not fenced or enclosed), public knowledge, a break in an electrical current path, freely accessible, not closed, not shut in or confined, uncovered, exposed to the air, unoccupied, porous, unobstructed, loose, permeable, easy to

understand, and in mathematics, a formula containing at least one free variable (OED X 834-837). It seems that most of these understandings of "open" presuppose the binary opposite to open: closed. Oddly enough, on a socio-cultural level, following the dominant social paradigms, or culturally orthodox "trails," is considered the "open" path; that is, there are no cultural impediments to following this path. Leaving the path for what might otherwise be known as the "open" territory is not an option—or at least it is socially discouraged. Such social discouragement rarely takes on the form of official "thought police" hiding around the accepted boundaries. More often it is an accumulation of tradition, or to continue the path metaphors, a rut. One example in the academic arena is reflected in Mark Johnson's website *Sellout: A Resource for PhDs Considering Careers Beyond the University*. Of course, the fact that such a website exists is a clue that, at least in this area, academic paradigms are in a transition phase. There has been a great deal of looking-down-the-nose at technical writers and other humanities graduates who have fled the academy in the past, but the reality of the job market—too many PhDs, not enough "respectable" research-oriented academic positions—has forced many people to take another look at "selling out." This shift underscores the cultural contingency of social paradigms and points to the notion that such paradigms are not as fixed or stable as they appear to the psyche of the individual.

While "The Trail is Not a Trail" centers on individual experience, another of Snyder's poems, "Off the Trail," explores the notion of openness in relationships, and is, in a sense, a companion piece to "The Trail is Not a Trail." "Off the Trail" (*No Nature* 369-370) is dedicated to Carole Koda (his wife), and can be read as a poem about

relationships which develops a spatial metaphor that stresses the difference between being on and off the trail: Relationships cannot form and grow according to strict linear models or general principles (on the trail), but must be allowed the "openness" that exists in spontaneity and allowing the "other" the freedom to follow the "path" or non-path of his or her own choosing (off the trail). It may be possible for relationships to grow by following such guidebooks as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but not the type of relationship hinted at in the poem. However, as is the case with most of Snyder's poetry, it is difficult to ignore the constant pull back to the physicality of the world. It is not just a poem about relationships; it is always also a poem about two people literally making their way through the spaces to be found off the path and the psychic difference that this makes:

> We are free to find our own way
> Over rocks—through the trees—
> Where there are no trails. The ridge and the forest
> Present themselves to our eyes and feet
> Which decide for themselves
> In their old learned wisdom of doing
> Where the wild will take us. We have
> Been here before.

Stepping off the trail forces the body to be engaged on a different level. The eyes and feet must make constant judgements and adjustments and have the ability to operate according to a "wisdom" that is non-rational, but highly effective. The "wild" animal in

the human can still operate, if given the opportunity. The "wild" becomes a place where the body is not detached from its surroundings, but becomes an interactive part of a living system.

It's more intimate somehow
Than walking the paths that lay out some route
That you stick to,
All paths are possible, many will work,
Being blocked is its own kind of pleasure,
Getting through is a joy, the side-trips
And detours show down logs and flowers,
The deer paths straight up, the squirrel tracks
Across, the outcroppings lead us on over.

The intimacy flows two ways here. There is an intimacy between the travelers and the "wild," and there is an intimacy hinted at between the two travelers, which becomes more evident in the last lines of the poem. The closeness of the physical bodies of the travelers and the "wild" is particularly evident in the fact that "being blocked is its own kind of pleasure." The actual challenge of finding a way (or perhaps allowing the way to find *you*, cf. lines 3-4) forces the body to respond to the constantly changing terrain. On the trail, there is the meditative magic of smooth, rhythmic walking. Off the trail there is another, slower rhythm.

Between the two travelers, intimacy comes paradoxically through allowing for separation and individual choice:

Resting on treetrunks,

Stepping out on the bedrock, angling and eyeing

Both making choices—now parting our ways—

And later rejoin; I'm right, you're right,

We come out together.

Both travelers are responsible for making decisions. "Both making choices" can be read that both travelers have a say in directions, and can also mean each traveler makes her or his own choices within the general direction to which the "wild" is leading them. To "come out together" thus points not only to coming out in the same physical space, but also to coming out with an intimate bond that perhaps would not be there if one traveler tried to force a path upon the other. But just as the poem seems to be shifting fully into a poem about the two travelers, the "wild" makes its presence felt again:

Mattake, "Pine Mushroom,"

Heaves at the base of a stump. The dense matted floor

Of Red Fir needles and twigs. This is wild!

We laugh, wild for sure,

Because no place is more than another,

All places total,

And our ankles, knees, shoulders &

Haunches know right where they are.

The mushrooms and pine needles make themselves known to the physical bodies of the travelers, whose bodies know in a physical sense where they are. The "where" of the

location, however, is an experiential knowledge of place, rather than the kind of map knowledge that comes with Global Positioning Satellite technology, for there is no "place" that is more or less than another. In other words, there is no linear destination that is leading the minds and bodies of these travelers. Each place in each moment is "total"; each is experienced fully for what it is in the moment.

The last nine lines of the poem begin with an interesting link to "The Trail is Not a Trail." The title of the latter poem refers to the first line of Lao Tzu's *Dao De Jing*, which, Snyder points out, can be translated "the way that can be followed is not a true way" or "a trail that can be followed is not the true trail" ("No Trail"). Other translations of this line have been "Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao;" "The TAO that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name;" or "Existence is beyond the power of words to define: Terms may be used but are none of them absolute" (*Tao Teh Ching* 3, *Way of Life* 97, *Way of Lao Tzu* 25)**.** For Taoism and Buddhism, the "way" is a central metaphor. The "way" of the Tao cannot be "fenced in" by language. The Buddha also warned his followers not to get caught up in the specific words he used to describe enlightenment. The idea is to maintain non-attachment to views. If you think you can turn the "way" into an exact trail with definite boundaries that can be followed precisely by anyone with a map, you have already left the "way." Wing-Tsit Chan, in his translation of the *Dao De Jing*, comments upon a fundamental difference between Taoism and schools which "insist on the correspondence of names and actualities and accept names as necessary and good; Taoism, on the contrary, rejects names in favor of the nameless . . . when names arise, that is, when the

simple oneness of [D]ao is split up into individual things with names, it is time to stop" (97). "Off the Trail," offers another gloss:

> Recall how the *Dao De*
>
> *Jing* puts it: the trail's not the way.
>
> No path will get you there, we're off the trail,
>
> You and I, and we chose it! Our trips out of doors
>
> Through the years have been practice
>
> For this ramble together,
>
> Deep in the mountains
>
> Side by side,
>
> Over rocks, through the trees.

If the "point" is to not have a destination, a trail is not the best place to be. According to the poem, relationships are not things that can be worked on by following a plan to get to a pre-determined place. The two travelers have chosen to make openness central to their relationship, and actual rambles through the physical wild have given them ways to understand the wild nature of relationships. Snyder also hints that perhaps past attempts at relationships have taught them about this wildness. Though the final condition of the travelers is "together . . . side by side," the poem interlaces these thoughts with descriptions of the physical wild. As with "Axe Handles," the pattern for relationships is "not far off" for these two travelers in the wild. In other words, the model for relationships with the wild is parallel to the relationship between Snyder and his wife that is described throughout the poem.

As is true of "The Trail is Not a Trail," "Off the Trail" is an excellent example of how Snyder integrates writing about the earth as a place and writing about that place as a metaphor for human experience. Borrowing living patterns from ecosystems for paradigms seems a natural progression from living close to the earth. In a sense, humans and the earth create each other. This is reflected in Snyder's thoughts on a "New Nature Poetics," which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Six. The new poetry of nature should, according to Snyder, "study mind and language—language as wild system, mind as wild habitat, world as a 'making' (poem), poem as a creature of the wild mind" (*Practice* 172).

The Experience of Walking: On and Off the Trail

There are trails that are chosen for their directness, and those that are chosen for other qualities, such as scenery. The choices of the traveler can be set aside, in the sense that either type of trail takes you from point A to point B. Some, like the narrator in Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, might suggest that the experience of the trail at any given moment *is* point B. In other words, where you are going is not the point, but where you are right now is. The *experience* of the trail is the destination. In this case, it is possible to conclude that for such travelers there is only a slight difference between being on the trail and off the trail. What makes such a traveler distinct from a linear traveler is perhaps that the former sees the present moment as the primary goal, whereas the latter sees some far off point B as the primary goal. A sort of literary meditation springs from the tradition of writings about the experience of walking and hiking.

Thoreau's essay "Walking" is in some ways a reflection of times that are no more. As Kim Taplin reminds us in *The English Path*, before the twentieth century "all country people except the gentry made their short journeys on foot or on horseback, so that locally paths were as important as roads as a means of communication and in providing mental landscapes" (1). The English literary tradition is full of references to paths, and for the English Romantic writers, most notably Wordsworth, walking often led to spaces that became the occasion of a poem. In America, John Muir found himself choosing to leave the major paths in his rambles across the continent, and in the process, the wilderness made him an unwitting nature writer, since most of the "books" he wrote were in fact his journals. In *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf,* a record of his trek from Indiana to Florida, he wrote, "My plan was simply to push on in a general southward direction by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find, promising the greatest extent of virgin forest" (1-2). In "Walking," Thoreau highlights the notion of wildness, which in many ways runs parallel to Snyder's openness:

> I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that. (659-660)

Thoreau saw the need to remind his contemporaries of the "animal" side of the human species, the part of us that is wild and "natural." This is in part a manifestation of a

tendency toward primitivism found in the writings of many an American transcendentalist of the nineteenth century, in which the ideal place for human habitation is far from the corrupting influences of civilization. Many of his neighbors, for instance, claim to remember the freedom they found in childhood rambles "in which they were so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the woods; I know very well that they have confined themselves to the highway ever since, whatever pretensions they may make to belong to this select class [walkers]" (661). Even though the "highway" is used here as a metaphor for society, Thoreau obviously sees a literal connection between the woods, the highway, and culture. In fact, he seems to equate open spaces with freedom in a manner that is simultaneously literal and metaphoric:

> At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure-grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only—when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road, and walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. To enjoy a thing exclusively is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it. Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come. (667)

Walking, for Thoreau, is a sort of inalienable right. Any cultural practices that prohibit freedom of movement are belittling and push humans further and further towards the

absurd position of claiming distinction from the non-human. This seems to echo Snyder's inclinations toward living "off the trail," yet Thoreau does not attempt to hide from his readers the fact that one of Nature's chief functions is to serve as a poetic tool:

> Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him . . . [who] transplanted [words] to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring . . . to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. (677).

But even though Nature is the poet's tool, there is an understanding here that for the poet to have access to this kind of tool, a sort of wilderness apprenticeship is necessary. Like Snyder's insistence on the importance of rootedness in place for poetry, Thoreau's poetics is based upon a daily familiarity with wildness.

Lew Welch, a friend of Snyder since their days at Reed College, also felt this rootedness, which resonated with his Buddhist meditation. In section six of "Wobbly Rock," he describes one hike where the notion of being on or off the trail began to lose its significance:

> On a trail nor far from here
> Walking in meditation
> We entered a dark grove
> And I lost all separation in step with the

Eucalyptus as the trail walked back beneath me (30)

On the trail, Welch was reminded that there is no separation between himself and everything else. And, as can be seen in section two of "Hiking Poem / High Sierra," the knowledge that he is not separate is necessarily tied to the physical act of moving through the wild:

Absolute fatigue perhaps way to Perfect Total Enlightenment?
my last poor shred of sense decides to count my steps
900 901 902 903 904 905
"surely half a mile" becomes, thereby,
a little less than 300 yards
THE MIRACLE OF THE HUMAN MIND!
12 hours going in, counting and cursing all the way,
6 hours coming out, free.
Trails go nowhere.
They end exactly
where you stop. (23)

There is something eerie about these lines. They seem to call attention to the boundaries of "you," or, the self. Is the trail a sort of boundary for the self? Or is this poem eerie because it points out a paradox: people create and are created by trails? This is the paradox that informs most of the discussion in this chapter.

A recent Reebok magazine advertisement consisted of a geological map of Crater Lake National Park in Oregon with the phrase "GET OFF THE ROAD" printed large,

covering the map. Presumably, the athletic-wear company wishes the audience to head out for the backcountry, outfitted, of course, with the latest Reebok gear. However, it is questionable that the best hiking gear would be sufficient to get someone off the road in a metaphoric sense. Tom Brown's Grandfather warned about the dangers of all trails, even the least traveled:

> Do not get so absorbed in the track that you lose your place in the oneness. By limiting your vision to the track, you also limit your senses, and your awareness does not reach beyond that track. You are thus imprisoned by the track and you lose consciousness of the spirit-that-moves-through-all-things. You then only understand nature in fragments and never fully comprehend the larger realms of the universe . . . All tracks should be viewed as concentric rings, influenced and influencing the worlds beyond. A track is the beginning and the ending of all concentric rings. Vary then your vision from the tracks and stay conscious of the worlds beyond. (*Science* 22)

On or off the trail, awareness of the present moment is central for those who would not be trapped by destinations. And it is this awareness that enables a sense of selflessness that holds a key to a new understanding of how the human species can get back into proper relations with the ecosystem. Nature writers and poets like Snyder operate as eco-ambassadors who seek to heal strained relations.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VISCERAL ELEMENT

Gary Snyder's poetry draws attention to the peculiar situation in which we as humans have found ourselves regarding the connections we acknowledge or do not acknowledge between our "selves" (whatever those may be), our physical bodies, and the "more-than-human," or all of the non-human components of the biosphere. The physical body is important in Snyder's poetry, as is the physical experience of being human. This is, as Snyder points out, an understanding of poetry as "the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels common to all who listen" (*Earth House Hold* 117). As is hinted by his use of the phrase "powerful states of mind," there is more to the poetic endeavor than the physical sound of the voice, yet these states of mind are *embodied* by the voice, and mind itself is in a very literal--and perhaps literally inescapable--way housed by the body. Although public interest in poetry reading has increased in the past decade through such things as poetry slams where cash prizes are awarded, it is clear that for most people, poetry is something in a book that is hard to read and understand. Poetry is linked to school, a boring endeavor. Snyder's body-centered vision of poetry is important to the experience of his poetry, for he insists that poetry is the result of shamanic activity, or as he has put it, "I think the poet articulates the semi-known for the tribe" (*Real* 5). This

articulation comes through a physical, living, breathing poet and is brought to "*real* people, not a faceless audience" (*Real* 5).

In a similar vein, Michael McClure explains the drive behind his own poetic endeavors in his discussion of "Point Lobos: Animism:"

> I wanted to tell of my feelings of hunger, of emptiness, and of epiphany. I hoped to state the sharpness of a demonic joy that I found in a place of incredible beauty on the coast of Northern California. I wanted to say how I was overwhelmed by the sense of animism--and how everything (breath, spot, rock, ripple in the tidepool, cloud, and stone) was alive and spirited. It was a frightening and joyous awareness of my undersoul. I say *undersoul* because I did not want to join Nature by my mind but by my viscera--my belly. (*Scratching* 26)

McClure desires to "join Nature" in a manner that is distinct from romantic transcendentalism, which uses non-human nature as a stepping stone to supernatural awareness. Rather, McClure finds that there is a meaningful connection between the body and the non-human, as well as a connection between mind and body, mind and matter. This connection shows up in a number of poems by Gary Snyder, such as "The Bath," and is a major concern of his prose. Of course, this connection between body, mind and matter encompasses more than just a strict understanding of viscera as "abdomen," and in this discussion, viscera operates more as a synecdoche for the totality of the physical senses that create human experience. Snyder asks his readers to remember that (1) their bodies are an important part of who they are and (2) this fact is not a liability or

something to be lamented. Snyder's poetic voice says "I am this body," and the celebration of this acknowledgement is obvious in his poetry.

David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, also asks his readers to acknowledge the notion "I am this body" which roots any notions of selfness in a physical form. Yet, to acknowledge that the physical body is intertwined with who we are is not as limiting as some would imagine:

> To acknowledge that "I am this body" is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my "self" to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form. It is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object, for as we shall see, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. (46)

Abram, like Neil Evernden, questions the boundaries that are often associated with notions of the physical body, and, as Evernden points out, when notions of the solidity of the boundaries of the self are questioned, traditional understandings of selfness are, if not undermined, drastically altered. Anticipating the anxiety aroused by such an expansion of self-identity, Abram reminds his readers that

> . . . these mortal limits in no way close me off from the things around me or render my relations to them wholly predictable and determinate. On the contrary, my finite bodily presence alone is what enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or

> places, to insinuate myself in other lives. Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things. (47)

The experiencing self is central to Abram's discussion and the sensing body is a vital element in such experiences. Abram also takes this notion one step further when he suggests that our sensory experiences could be described as the earth experiencing itself through us:

> Clearly, a wholly immaterial mind could neither see things nor touch things--indeed, could not experience anything at all. *We* can experience things--can touch, hear, and taste things--only because, as bodies, we ourselves are entirely part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us. (68)

The idea that we are parts of a larger life-form has also surfaced in recent visions of organisms that have come out of studies in the Gaia hypothesis, in which humans could be considered organs of or parasites on the super-organism, Earth.

In this chapter, I will examine the way in which Snyder, through his poetry, acknowledges the physical nature of our self-ness, and how these poems shed light on some of the bodily relationships we form within family and community contexts (human and biotic). Too many of Snyder's poems would fit the scope of this project, so I have attempted to examine the poems in which the body and/or bodily relationships are central. The poems I have selected for this study span Snyder's career, yet are connected

by an emphasis on the presence of the physical body. Of course, it is impossible for any poem to be devoid of human presence, since poetry is a part of and expression of human experience. But in Snyder's poetry there is almost always a recognizably human presence, for even if there are no body parts mentioned specifically in the language, sensory experience is a vital force in his poetry. The poem "Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads," for example, is in part a list of things to do in various locations. Here is a portion of the section "*Things to Do Around Portland*:"

> Go walk along the Sandy when the smelt run
> Drink buttermilk at the Buttermilk Corner
> Walk over Hawthorne Bridge the car tires sing
> Take the trolley out to Sellwood when cherries are in bloom
> Hiking the woods below Council Crest, a tree house high in a Douglas fir near the medical school . . . (*Mountains* 25-26)

A human body is *there*, or present because the reader may assume that the speaker has in fact experienced these things, but we only know this because the list encourages the reader to pay attention to the five senses: hear the singing of the tires, taste the thick buttermilk, smell the buttermilk and the cherry blossoms, feel the woods beneath your feet and hands, and see the treehouse. I have selected poems for this chapter which do make mention of body parts because it is interesting to note what kinds of bodies these parts add up to, and what kind of relationships are formed by these bodies.

Body as Experiencing Being

Western tradition says that the human self is made up of two seemingly incompatible parts: the body, or the physical makeup of the self; and the soul, which is a metaphysical entity usually thought to be peculiar to the human species.[1] In fact, the soul is often considered to be the "real" self, since in many western religious traditions, it is the part of the self that will continue to exist after the death of the physical body. And this dichotomy does not settle the matter of whether the mind is a part of the body or the soul or an altogether different part of the self. Another important aspect of the idea of the self is that self refers to those things that make one human "distinct from any other" (*Webster*). However, the idea of the self is just that: an idea. Alan Watts finds this idea to be a potentially dangerous one:

> Our problem is that the power of thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves. This includes the ability to make a symbol, an idea of ourselves apart from ourselves. . . . Hence the subjective feeling of a "self" which "has" a mind, of an inwardly isolated subject to whom experiences involuntarily happen. With its characteristic emphasis on the concrete, Zen points out that our precious "self" is just an idea, useful and legitimate enough if seen for what it is, but disastrous if identified with our real nature. The unnatural awkwardness of a certain type of self-consciousness comes into being when we are aware of conflict

[1] One interesting illustration of this dichotomy can be found in Andrew Marvell's poem "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body."

> or contrast between the idea of ourselves, on the one hand, and the immediate, concrete feeling of ourselves, on the other. (120-121)

This "concrete feeling of ourselves," or the fact that as experiencing beings we are inextricably interrelated to the physical world in which we live, has become quite easy to ignore. It is possible to experience the world by watching the Discovery Channel while sitting in an air-conditioned home. During commercial breaks, visit the bathroom, where any unpleasant bodily deposits and fluids will swirl out of sight and out of mind more quickly than they left the body. And before your hunger reminds you that you have a physical body which requires fuel, you can call the local pizza delivery establishment. Dirty floors? Quick, get the vacuum cleaner! It is surprising how little we see ourselves as having to physically interact with the world on a daily basis.

Many of Snyder's poems explore the human animal as an experiencing being. An example from *Axe Handles* is the poem "Money Goes Upstream" (101-102), in which the speaker is attending a meeting where people are discussing "reason / Higher consciousness, the unconscious." Much like Whitman's persona in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," the speaker's thoughts quickly begin to wander to the "hot sunshine" and "a patch of tan grass and thorny buckbrush" outside. After hearing talk of law and wealth and the power that goes with these things, the speaker reflects: "I can smell the grass, feel the stones with bare feet though I sit here shod and clothed with all the people. That's my power." The speaker has an awareness of the physical roots that s/he has with the "reality" of the earth. Talking about experience, which is what a great deal of the meeting seems to be about, is meaningless without some sort of grounding in

actual experience. The preceding poem in *Axe Handles*, "Uluru Wild Fig Song" (95-98), is an account of one of those grounding experiences. The poem describes a walk around Ayers Rock, Uluru, a location in Australia. Lunch is taken near a native fig tree that is conspicuously isolated from others of its species. The conclusion is that someone, years earlier, ate figs and then "shat" at this very spot. The seeds in the feces sprouted into a tree that is now heavy with fruit. An imaginative dream occurs in the second section of the poem:

Sit in the dust

take the clothes off. feel it on the skin

lay down. roll around

run sand through your hair.

nap an hour

bird calls through dreams

now

you're clean. (96)

And as the speaker awakes, s/he is "sitting on red sand ground with a dog," women and men sing and make rhythms with boomerangs--"singing the land." This is a poem of the ways of living so close to the land that the land is what you sing, you are covered with its dust, you eat what it has to offer on any particular day. The poem ends with "hard wild fig on the tongue" which links the sense of taste with memory of experience, experience of the land.

In two other *Axe Handle* poems, "Look Back" (28-29) and "Soy Sauce" (30-31), there is also a tie between sensory experience and memory. "Look Back" is a remembrance of a moment when Snyder worked on a trail crew at Piute mountain. On lunch breaks, rather than sit around munching, Snyder would take off and "run the ridges" of the mountain. One Sunday, he even built a sweat lodge by the creek. At this time Snyder was also studying Chinese in the evenings after work, preparing for a trip to Japan.[2] When Snyder returned years later to the Sawtooth range, he found that "The up and down of it / stays in my feet." His body's memory of the place was even more vivid than his mental memory of the place. In "Soy Sauce," there is a similar trigger of memory based on sensory experience. Once while helping friends build a house, he noticed a "sour salt smell" in the wood and asked his friends about it. Holly replied: "Scored a broken-up, two-thousand-gallon redwood / soy sauce tank from a company that went out of business / down near San Jose" (30). A memory is triggered of a time when he sat eating "a bowl of chill miso radish pickles" with a friend in the Japanese Alps (31). The deer have been licking the wood at night, Snyder's friends tell him, and he is able to make an intensely visceral connection with the deer:

I know how it tastes
to lick those window frames
in the dark,
the deer (31)

[2] Although it may seem confusing that Snyder would be preparing for a trip to Japan by studying Chinese, in Japan he would be studying the Chinese language and participating in translation work at the First Zen Institute of America's Kyoto facility, directed by Ruth Sasaki.

His sense of smell triggers a memory of a taste, which links him to the experience that the deer have been having each night at this house. This curious interrelation between things stored in the mind and things experienced by the body is also highlighted in "English Lessons at the Boiler Company," from the collection *Left Out in the Rain*. Snyder describes Japanese children learning to speak English, and his language probably recalls his own experiences learning other languages: "Strange feeling sounds, odd puffs and buzzes, / Bend tongues, re-wrap the brain" (105). Language is a phenomenon through which brain and body intersect and interact. Snyder suggests that for a new language to be used, the body and the mind must undergo bending and re-wrapping. In other words, it is not enough to want to speak another language--your body must be trained to move in new ways. New memories of postures and positions must be stored in the brain for future use by the body.

The last poem in *Axe Handles*, "For All" (113-114), is Snyder's reworking of the pledge of allegiance. A scene that establishes a foundation precedes this new pledge:

Ah to be alive

on a mid-September morn

fording a stream

barefoot, pants rolled up,

holding boots, pack on,

sunshine, ice in the shallows,

northern Rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters

stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes

cold nose dripping

singing inside

creek music, heart music,

smell of sun on gravel. (113)

The description is of bodily saturation in the earth, in the experience of crossing a stream. All of the senses are engaged. The rest of the poem turns from the individual experiencing being to the larger context of ecosystem, which shifts the allegiance from arbitrary demographic lines to natural rhythms and connections:

I pledge allegiance to the soil

of Turtle Island,

one ecosystem

in diversity

under the sun

With joyful interpenetration for all. (113-114)

The final emphasis is upon interpenetration of all life rather than upon the individual. The context of ecosystem thinking does not place any one part at the center. Nothing exists in and of itself--our bodies exist in contexts, whether these are social contexts, such as family or community, or the biological contexts of ecosystems.

Body in Context

The search for alternative understandings of the self is at the center of the aims of deep ecology, which is an ecology that critiques the underlying assumptions our culture

has developed concerning our relationship to the whole. In *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Deval and Sessions ask, "What does it mean to be a unique human individual? How can the individual self maintain its uniqueness while also being an inseparable aspect of the whole system wherein there are no sharp breaks between self and the *other*?" (65). There is not a simple answer to these questions, but it is clear that how we answer them can make a huge difference. Deval and Sessions point in one possible direction:

> . . . the deep ecology norm of self-realization goes beyond the modern Western *self* which is defined as an isolated ego striving primarily for hedonistic gratification or for a narrow sense of individual salvation in this life or the next. This socially programmed sense of the narrow self or social self dislocates us, and leaves us prey to whatever fad or fashion is prevalent in our society or social reference group. . . . Spiritual growth, or unfolding, begins when we cease to understand ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans from our family and friends to, eventually, our species. (66-67)

They suggest here that self-realization, or coming to terms with who or what you are as a self, can only begin when the self is not isolated, but rooted in physical community with other humans. But self-realization doesn't stop there: "the deep ecology sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond our narrow contemporary cultural assumptions and values, and the conventional wisdom of our time and place . . ." (67). In fact, a premise of deep ecology is the idea of the "self-in-Self," in

which any individual part of the ecosystem, human or more-than-human, has a self that can only be realized within the context of a larger Self (67). The concerns of any individual self should be the concerns of the biotic community. This is not a new way of thinking, nor do Deval and Sessions claim it to be so: "We believe . . . that we may not need something new, but need to reawaken something very old, to reawaken our understanding of Earth wisdom" (ix).

It does not take a lengthy reading of Snyder's poetry or prose to notice a regard for this old wisdom. His work springs from years of study of Native American and Eastern understandings of the earth, as well as years spent working often in a community (as a logger, member of a trail crew, fire lookout, etc.) and living close to the land. In his poetry, the human is fully present as an animal and as an experiencing being that exists within communities. At least one hundred of his poems present physical detail of a part of a human body. At times his verse also shakes up our customary ways of looking at and describing our experiences as human animals. "The Bath" is one example from the Pulitzer-prize winning *Turtle Island* (12-14). The poem begins with the action and imagery of Snyder giving his son Kai a bath in the sauna at their home in Kitkitdizze. Kai pleads with Gary "don't soap my hair" because he is afraid the soap will sting his eyes (12). Up to this point, there is nothing at all unusual in the scene or language, but as Gary's "soapy hand" continues the washing, the reader is given some peculiar details:

> the soapy hand feeling
> through and around the globes and curves of his body
> up in the crotch,

And washing-tickling out the scrotum, little anus,

his penis curving up and getting hard

as I pull back skin and try to wash it

Laughing and jumping, flinging arms around,

I squat all naked too,

is this our body? (12)

The reader might connect with the idea of washing a young boy with only the bare mention of a struggle to wash behind the reluctant boy's ears; instead there is a description of Snyder washing Kai's crotch, and in the process, Kai's penis becomes erect. One reaction would be to dismiss the poem at this point as being a bit too graphic. In the minds of many there is only one kind of person who would write, or enjoy, a poem about a little boy's erect penis: a pederast. Another response would be to read on, and it would become clear that this is not, however, a poem about Kai's penis, or, at least not exclusively. At the end of each section there is a refrain similar to the first italicized question: "*is this our body?*" Who is asking this question? Kai? Gary? A persona one step more removed from the scene? The question points to something we may all ask of ourselves at times when we are aware of our physical being, or the physical nature of our offspring. "Is this naked creature giving his son a bath *me*?" Snyder may ask. Or he might ask, "Is this boy, my son, a part of my body--a continuation of the life of my wife and me?"

In the second stanza, Masa--Snyder's then-wife--enters and immediately knows that Kai's hair still needs washing. Her body also comes through the eye of the poet to the reader:

Masa comes in, letting fresh cool air
    sweep down from the door
    a deep sweet breath
And she tips him over gripping neatly, one knee down
    her hair falling hiding one whole side of
    shoulder, breast, and belly,
Washes deftly Kai's head-hair
    as he gets mad and yells--
The body of my lady, the winding valley spine,
    the space between the thighs I reach through,
    cup her curving vulva arch and hold it from behind,
    a soapy tickle a hand of grail
The gates of Awe
That open back a turning double-mirror world of
    wombs in wombs, in rings,
    that start in music,
        is this our body? (12-13)

Again, it is not enough to mention that the family is steamy and soapy, but the poet must describe a gesture he has with his wife in the presence of their son. This is not something

that is a part of everyday discussions (at least not when I've been around to notice, but then again, in my family we did not all take a bath at the same time, as is a custom in Japan), and it may seem like too much information. And yet, if this passage is disturbing, why is it so? It is not that they are bathing together, nor that Snyder and Masa are intimate. What is shocking is that, without describing any of the other circumstances of his gesture, such as Masa's re/actions toward Snyder, he simply reaches over and grabs her "vulva arch," which he then tickles and turns into a poetic symbol of sorts. I will discuss some issues relating to Snyder's poems that contain physical descriptions of his lovers and wives at greater length, but now the focus will remain on how the incredible wonder or "Awe" of the body has inspired another refrain: "*is this our body?*" The female genitalia are lifted up to the status of a goddess to be worshipped because of the mystery of birth, generation after generation--the many from one. Of course, this passage could also just be a direct acknowledgement that Snyder is sexually aroused, which is also something to be embraced rather than something to be ashamed of. However, it is still perhaps shocking for the reader to read this description of sexual playfulness, while remembering that the little boy is nearby. *Our body* is further shaded here as a question about the interrelationship of the human species.

The "holy" imagery continues in the third stanza, where Snyder describes Masa's breasts:

> The veins net flow across the ribs, that gathers
>
> milk and peaks up in a nipple--fits
>
> our mouth--

The sucking milk from this our body sends through

jolts of light; the son, the father,

sharing mother's joy

That brings a softness to the flower of the awesome

open curling lotus gate I cup and kiss

As Kai laughs at his mother's breast he now is weaned

from, we

wash each other,

this our body (13)

In this stanza Masa's breast becomes a sensual sacrament for the family. The father and the son have their own gratitude for what it gives as they kiss it. Sustenance and pleasure are physically interwoven, as the very lives and bodies of these three are interwoven. Line 18 affirms that the milk is from "our" body, blurring the line between mother, father, and son, and the stanza ends with the beginning of an answer to the question of the first two refrains. In both cases there are parallels to the language of liturgy. Life comes from the mother's egg and the father's seed, yet they too were once children of mothers and fathers who were the same before them.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker muses upon the seed "still tucked away" in Kai's "little scrotum up close to his groin," and traces the seed/energy flow that moved from Gary and Masa to Kai (13). The mood is still one of playfulness as the seed moves:

In flows that lifted with the same joys forces

as his nursing Masa later,

playing with her breast,

Or me within her,

Or him emerging,

this is our body: (13)

The biological complexity of procreation is linked to the speaker and his family, thus emphasizing the physical interrelationship of the family affirmed again in the refrain, which points to the next stanza. There the poem returns to the "real time" of the bath: the clean feeling, the steam, the smells of redwood and cedar, the thumpings of the heart, thoughts of the youngest boy, Gen, who is sleeping in the house. This stanza ends, not with a refrain, but with another look at the mother/son relationship:

These boys who love their mother

who loves men, who passes on

her sons to other women; (14)

The return to reflection here continues the cyclical imagery of family, and hints at the ways in which love is learned and passed on bodily from generation to generation. The last refrain follows the next one-line stanza, a description of the wind, sky and meadow, and this time the refrain is followed by a period. This places a final emphasis on the answer to the question. The family is one body, yet this one body flows through individuals from generation to generation. The last few lines of the poem describe the family's return to the house, as they sit naked, warming themselves by the fire:

This is our body. Drawn up crosslegged by the flames

drinking icy water

hugging babies, kissing bellies,

Laughing on the Great Earth

Come out from the bath. (14)

Again, the speaker affirms the unity of the family, and this unity is based on the sharing of one body. Also, the poem opens up to a larger vision of sharing one body. All life is, in a sense, "Laughing on the Great Earth," and all life is in a real way one body. The "bath" is not only the Snyder family bath. This poem is also an act of "cleansing" away the awkwardness that has strangely crept upon our culture, where nakedness, breasts, and erections are equated with filth, smut, and pornography. If we as readers feel awkward upon reading the poem, it is as important to ask of ourselves why as to look for causes in the poem. The same can be said of our species' pride. Are we too "advanced" to not claim kinship with the earth, or at least with the bodies of others?

"The Bath" explores the notion of what it is to have a physical body. There is a constant return to physical description of the scene, things that the people experiencing the bath would experience. Steam, crackles of water, sweat, sounds of splashing, cool air from outside, bodies touching and washing each other, sounds of the fire, cold water. Though the biology of the family can be read about in textbooks, there is still a spirit of mystery surrounding the biological cycles of the family. And even though it is clear that each member of the family has an individual identity, it is impossible for any of them to claim a self outside the context of community, in this case the family and the natural rhythms of the Great Earth.

Snyder has written quite a few poems about various lovers and his wives. Often in these poems sexuality, is central to the description of the relationship. In "After Work," from *The Back Country*, the speaker (presumably a man) comes in after working outdoors and approaches a woman who is preparing a meal:

> I pull out your blouse,
> warm my cold hands
> on your breasts.
> You laugh and shudder
> peeling garlic by the
> hot iron stove. (22)

The scene is obviously of a sexual nature, since it would have been just as effective for the speaker to warm his hands by the "hot iron stove" nearby. The last phrase of the poem confirms a romantic scene:

> we'll lean on the wall
> against each other
> stew simmering on the fire
> as it grows dark
> drinking wine. (22)

The reader must imaginatively supply the rest of the two bodies leaning against each other, since all the poem mentions are hands and breasts. However, it is clear that the communion of the two lovers is a welcome part of the day "after work." The two people have been working within a community of two, each performing tasks that are important

to their physical lives: wood for the fire, food for the body. As the evening meal cooks, there is a natural time into which intimacy fits rather comfortably.

A more troubling poem that describes two "friends" who are possibly lovers, is "For a Far-Out Friend," in *Riprap* (13-14). In the first line, the speaker admits to beating up his/her[3] lover while drunk, and he is "stung with weeks of torment" over what he has done. Presumably, even though the beating took place in a moment of drunkenness, and although we have no way of knowing what prompted the action, the speaker was unhappy with the woman and thought that physical blows were the solution. There seems to be a desire for control behind this use of violence, for in the rest of the poem, the speaker describes his/her "friend" not as she "is" but as s/he thinks she should be:

> You once ran naked toward me
> Knee deep in cold March surf
> On a tricky beach between two
> pounding seastacks--
> I saw you as a Hindu Deva-girl
> Light legs dancing in the waves,
> Breasts like dream-breasts
> Of sea, and child, and astral
> Venus-spurting milk
> And traded our lips. (13)

[3] This poem is an example of how difficult it can be at times to keep Snyder separate from the speakers in his poems. Although in most cases, his poems seem to be taken from his personal life, in poems in which he does not identify the speaker/persona I have attempted to allow for other options rather than the poet-as-speaker.

Here the scene shifts from a remembered moment on the beach to a Hindu vision of a girl-goddess whose main features are dancing legs and "spurting" breasts. The scene then shifts to weeks later, after she left the speaker. The speaker has been kept "high for weeks," by "visions" of the woman's body, and while glancing through a book of Indian Art, the speaker finds a girl carved in stone who is reminiscent of his lost lover:

> Dancing in that life with
> Grace and love, with rings
> And a little golden belt, just above
> your naked snatch
> And I thought--more grace and love
> In that wild Deva life where you belong
> Than in this dress-and-girdle life
> You'll ever give
> Or get. (13-14)

The speaker laments that the woman is a part of "this dress-and-girdle life," which, as it stands in opposition to what appears to be a Hindu love-goddess lifestyle, conforms to mainstream cultural notions of what it means to be a woman. The only description we have of the distinction between these two "ways" of being a woman concerns clothing (or the lack thereof). It seems that the "friend" has chosen a different path than the speaker envisioned for her. She is "far-out" in the sense that her life has, in the speaker's mind, gone in an unnatural direction. However, the speaker's thoughts of what the friend should be like pose as much of an imposition as any cultural scripting she may have taken upon

herself. Even the reference to her genitalia as "snatch" connotes the idea that her sexuality is something that is to be "taken." The speaker values her for her body and its ability to please, if not through sexual intercourse, at least through the sensual imagery of her body parts. Patrick Murphy comments:

> What remains unclear at the end is the degree to which the speaker recognizes his own complicity. Does he realize that he too has been a part of that "dress-and-girdle life" through his violence and through his idealization of her physical attributes as displaying some divine essence? Further the problem of falling back on mythology to stereotype women, even when the stereotypes are allegedly positive and beatific, seems unrecognized. The images employed by Snyder in this poem of the Deva girl may seem part of a positive depiction of women, but they actually feed into the kind of stereotypes that he criticizes . . . (55)

This limited vision of women is a problematic area of Snyder's vision, especially given the critical work of feminists, which has focused on empowering women to free themselves from men's expectations, particularly those expectations regarding the female body. In fact, there are more physical descriptions of women than of men in Snyder's poetry, and though this alone is not necessarily problematic, many of the descriptions of women are not really descriptions of an entire woman, but more of an objectification of genitalia. This may be, as some have suggested, a peculiarity of his early poetry that he eventually overcame--perhaps he could not write about an entire woman until he had

more of a complete understanding of "woman." Charlene Spretnak has noted that some of Snyder's early poems

> ring with the tone of a rip-roarin' mountaineer grabbing pleasure where he dares. The women in the early works are often presented as slightly alien creatures who are perceived to be in an adversarial relationship, at some level, to the poet. He takes the challenge but keeps his distance as a defense. (361)

Spretnak does find that his later works treat women with more respect: "He reveres femaleness in all species. He approaches it as a pilgrim" (361).

Of course, as a man, he cannot have a truly complete understanding of what it is to be a woman, and thus he must place woman in relationship to himself. The trick is to express the contextual relationship in such a way that a reverence for femaleness informs sexual desires and negates sexual violence. This will not get Snyder out of trouble with those who wish to see women described powerfully without being "placed in context" with men. This "contextual" vision of women is important for many reasons, but in Snyder's work, all individuality is eventually tied back into the network of living systems: none of us, male or female, truly exist outside the context of relationships. The key, as it relates to ecology, is that all parts of the system have equal value. Carolyn Merchant connects this equilibrium to feminism, which "asserts the equality of men and women. Intellectual differences are human differences rather than gender—or race—specific. The lower position of women stems from culture rather than nature" (Deval 229).

His poems that describe women who are not his lovers often seem to be just as tied to musing upon physical form, and often there is specific description of their breasts. The poem "Ordering Chile Verde in Gallup," from *Left Out in the Rain*, is primarily a description of a waitress:

> Wet lips sidewise,
> lightly chewing gum,
> half parted, combed out bangs
> earrings almost to the shoulder
> calm wide eyes,
> large soft
> wide-moving body swinging
> out-pointed breasts
> in her white waitress dress,
> she tosses head and
> calls back to the kitchen,
>
> "Green, with" (132)

Physical descriptors include "wet lips," "half parted, combed out bangs," "calm wide eyes," and "large soft / wide-moving body swinging / out-pointed breasts." The question of whether this poem is about the waitress, the patron, or the experience is most important--the answer comes from the poem, but also loops back into the poem. If the poem is about the waitress, much information is missing that might otherwise give her

persona more depth, such as the quality of her voice or more of her actions previous to or following the "ordering." It does appear that the poem is, as the title indicates, tied to the moment of the "order," yet the poem tells us as much about the speaker as the waitress. The speaker chooses to describe her in terms that closely resemble a cow chewing its cud. There seems to be something bovine in her chewing, her motions, and even in the casual free-of-thought call, perhaps a "lowing," she gives to the kitchen. Of course, this does not mean that Snyder therefore sees women as kine; a cow's udders are not "out-pointed," and there is still a link between the waitress and the human female. It is this description of her breasts that, added to the other passive, blank descriptions, calls attention to the speaker who, it appears, has studied her body more closely than the menu. Of course, anyone might have noticed these specific characteristics of the waitress and felt that her breasts were perhaps a striking feature of her persona. But when this poem is placed in context with some of Snyder's other poems that physically describe women, it becomes one of many poems in which breasts are not quite a synecdoche for woman, but where the first is mentioned the second closely follows.

Another example of what may be a "breast-fixation" is Snyder's poem "Alabaster" (*Left Out in the Rain* 116). This poem reflects upon the experience of building Snyder's home, Kitkitdizze. The building was a community project, and some of the construction was done in the heat of summer, so clothing was limited literally to the bare minimum. "Alabaster" is a poem about the breasts of the women who worked that summer and is dedicated to "the women carpenters of Kitkitdizze":

The leather fringes

swing on the thighs.

ah so hot

only beads to wear are cool

And the girls chests like the mens

are bare

in the shade

but the girls differ though the men are the same.

Tanya's bosom like a drawn bow

Holly like a load of flowers

Ann's gracious fruits

Masa brown and slimming down

from milky dark-veined weight

and, slighter than the rest,

But strongly dappled in the

sweltering-shady mind,

Edie's alabaster breasts.

Even before the physical description of the women's breasts, there is a curious statement in the second stanza: "but the girls differ though the men are the same." Apart from the fact that the immature "girls" contrasts with the mature "men," the difference between the chests of women is highlighted, and in fact the speaker tells us that the chests of the men do not differ from one another. Physiologically, this is impossible, though perhaps in the eye of the speaker, the differences between men are not as noticeable as those between

the women. Would Snyder have written about the size and coloration differences between the penises of the men? Could he have dedicated such a poem to the male carpenters, and would the men have taken this as a tribute? The poem is, however, about the breasts of the women, and especially, it seems about "Edie's alabaster breasts." The descriptions of Tanya's, Ann's, and Holly's breasts turn their breasts into other objects, a drawn bow, flowers, fruits. The breasts of his wife are given a more straightforward description, perhaps because of familiarity. Edie's "strongly dappled" and "alabaster" breasts are curiously positioned in the mind of the speaker. The phrase in the last stanza, "in the / sweltering-shady mind," calls attention (as do the other descriptions in a less direct manner) to the fact that the descriptions are less telling of the breasts than of the mind of the speaker, although the speaker's mind is not "dirty," in a puritanical sense. Rather, the speaker romanticizes or perhaps even fetishizes the breasts. Even though the women carpenters may be comfortable with their bodies, and may have shed the cultural myths which have driven many women to thoughts of breast enhancement in order to "compete" with each other's bodies, this poem may cause them to compare and even judge each other's breasts. It may be that in the context of the construction, such physical comparisons were an acceptable topic of conversation, and it may be that none of the women found the subsequent poem troubling. They are part of the community and their work is as important as the work of the men. However, they are associated with their breasts, while the men are not associated by any physical descriptors.

His poems about Alison Gass, Joanne Kyger and Masa Uehara differ from most of the other poems in which women are mentioned because often the poems provide more

information about the relationships he had with his wives, especially the relationships between his body and theirs. *The Back Country*'s "For the Boy Who Was Dodger Point Lookout Fifteen Years Ago" is a remembrance of a hike that Snyder took with his first wife, Alison Gass, who was a friend from Reed College (31). Their marriage was a short one, but fifteen years later his memory of her is stirring:

> The snowmelt pond, and Alison
> half-stooped bathing like
> Swan Maiden, lovely naked,
> ringed with Alpine fir and
> gleaming snowy peaks. We
> had come for miles without trails

Alison, like the woman mentioned in "For a Far-Out Friend," is connected to a mythological idealization. However, there must have been something more about their relationship than his idealization of her naked body, for fifteen years later, Snyder writes to the boy whom he and Alison spoke with that day:

> I don't know where she is now;
> I never asked your name.
> In this burning, muddy, lying,
> blood-drenched world
> that quiet meeting in the mountains
> cool and gentle as the muzzles of
> three elk, helps keep me sane.

There is something lasting in this moment, even though the others who participated in that moment are gone. The memory of the boy, and the relationship between Alison and Snyder that the boy witnessed give the old love a lasting body in the mind of the poet and perhaps point to a future moment when love can be realized once again.

The poem "Joanne my wife" also demonstrates a sense of frustration with relationships. It is the last poem in a series called "Three poems for Joanne" in *Left Out in the Rain*. The occasion of the poem was a time in their relationship when things were far from smooth:

Joanne my wife
why frown
long legs are lovely
I like yr
freckld breast
you butt me at night
asleep
cry out for mother
hurt wild
like child
in dreams
I cd write you
no "love" poem
so long.

fights and the frown

at dawn. (93)

The frown is the first physical clue that the relationship is faltering, and though Snyder claims to like her legs and breasts, her sleeping body rejects him with somnambulistic butting. Actions and words that take place while sleeping or dreaming are often taken to be signs of true and unrestrained feelings. It is as if Snyder is keeping vigil over her the whole night, and Snyder the poet, as he looks at her sleeping form, as lovely as it is, knows that he cannot write a love poem for her. Possibly "so long," in addition to referring to Joanne's legs or the length of the night, is the poet acknowledging that the end has come. When we fall in love, we fall in love with a person who has a physical body, and Snyder suggests that it is important to love that physical body, because it is a part of the beloved. But Snyder also shows an understanding that there is something more than the physical surface, for the tension in this poem is also reflective of a deeper trouble.

Snyder's poems that include Masa tend to include the entire family, namely the children Kai and Gen. In these "family" poems it is clear that Snyder's relationship with Masa is much more mature than those of his previous marriages. "The Bath," discussed above, is by far the best example of this family dynamic. Though Snyder still shows a tendency to make a "goddess" out of Masa's genitalia, it seems that having a family has helped create a new understanding of the relationship between spouses. Sex has become something more than pleasure, and even understandings of sexual pleasure are perhaps shifted, as he sees the types of "arousal" and pleasures that transpire during the bath.

Snyder, however, is only "present" as the eye through which the scene comes to us. "Not Leaving the House," from *Regarding Wave* (34), is a similar scene from Kai's birth. Snyder becomes "domestic" as a new father:

> Hang around the kitchen--make cornbread
>
> Let nobody in.
>
> Mail is flat.
>
> Masa lies on her side, Kai sighs,
>
> Non washes and sweeps
>
> We sit and watch
>
> Masa nurse, and drink green tea.

Interestingly, Snyder does not mention Masa's breast in this poem. "Watch Masa nurse" and "Masa lies on her side" are as close as it comes to concrete physical description. The last sentence sheds light on the new "domesticity":

> From dawn til late at night
>
> making a new world of ourselves
>
> around this life.

Once again, with the arrival of children comes a change. A "new world of ourselves" is created "around this life." "This life" could be the baby, or the new way of living as a family. Whatever the case, this seems to be a moment when Snyder began to be aware of a new dimension of love. Something within him told him to remain in physical proximity in the early days of beginning a family so that this "new world" could be established with a strong foundation. Snyder also follows the growth of Kai and Gen in other poems, such

as “Changing Diapers,” which is about, of course, changing diapers, but also about what it means to be a man; and “The Years,” in which Snyder parallels the growth of his sons with the trees they are planting together. In both of these poems, there is a grounding in the physical connections between father and sons.

In Snyder’s poetry there are also passages in which he develops notions of the physical connection between the body and the greater community, both human and biotic. His book *Axe Handles* is in fact dedicated to San Juan Ridge, which is the name of the geographic area in which he lives, but also a name that has been taken on by the community of humans that lives there. Scott McLean, a resident of the Ridge, says about the community:

> . . . as in all communities, people fight, sometimes violently, and we have our proper share of bitchiness and quarrelsomeness, and people break up and suffer the same emotional unravelings and losses that people suffer everywhere. But such a commitment to place and community brings with it an overriding spirit of concern and care and less of the small-mindedness and selfishness that characterize much of what we call modern experience.
>
> The culture of the Ridge moves in funny, pragmatic-American, backcountry ways. But the circle of family, friends, and neighbors is the very heart of it, and has become the bedrock of Gary’s poetry the past twenty years . . . (132-133)

McLean then goes on to discuss some ways in which poetry has been an important part of life on the Ridge, especially in the area of community gatherings that are oriented toward decision-making about the land. Snyder has claimed that poetry (and even five-string banjo) needs to be reintroduced to community meetings, for poetry and music have an important community function, which Snyder describes as being akin to the work of the shaman:

> I'd emphasize again the importance of a sense of community, a need for the poet to identify with a *real* people, not a faceless audience. There should be less concern with publishing, more with reading. A reading is like a kind of communion. I think the poet articulates the semi-known for the tribe. (*Real* 5)

In poems like "Anasazi," and "On San Gabriel Ridges" Snyder emphasizes the ways in which living near the land impacts a culture. The first stanza of "On San Gabriel Ridges" describes the marks that the land leaves on the human body, "seeds, stickers, twigs, bits of grass / on my belly, pressed designs," and then goes on to envision the same marks for community "all of us together / with all our other loves and children / twining and knotting / through each other" (*Turtle Island* 40). "Anasazi" describes a community that lives so physically near the land that it seems that eventually there is no more rigid distinction between community and land: "sinking deeper into the earth / . . . / your eyes full of pollen / the smell of bats. / the flavor of sandstone / grit on the tongue" (*Turtle Island* 3). Max Oelschlaeger has observed of this poem that it

> discloses that the ancient ones were rooted in the earth in ways that elude modern people; steel and concrete have replaced sandstone, supermarkets and fast food have supplanted fields of corn and beans. . . . Snyder gives the poem a concrete, almost tactile, quality through the odor of the guano, and the flavor of sandstone in the breads made from the maize, further binding these premodern people with the *Magna Mater*. (269)

Magna Mater, or "the natural, organic process including soil and sun that created *Homo sapien*s and all other life-forms on earth" (2), is never far from the language and imagery of Snyder's poetry, whether the poems are about the nature of the physical self or the nature of community, from the family level to the larger cultural context.

Body and Poetry Performance

If poetry is to be a vital part of developing understandings of self and community, it must itself be rooted in experience and be written for particular people in particular places. Snyder explains in "Poetry, Community, and Climax":

> My own studies in anthropology, linguistics, and oral literature brought me to the realization that the performance, in a group context, is the pinnacle of poetic activity and precision, and we have yet to develop the possibilities of that circle with music, dance, and drama in their original archaic poetic relationship. (*Real* 164)

However, for this kind of poetry to be possible,

> The poet must have total sensitivity to the inner potentials for his own language--pulse, breath, glottals nasals & dentals. An ear, and eye and a belly.
>
> He must know his own unconscious, and the proper ways to meet with the beings who live there. As Confucius said, he should know the names of trees, birds, and flowers. From this knowledge and practice of "body, speech, and mind" the poem takes form freely. ("Yips" 357).

Snyder's life and work through the years has been practice for this kind of activity, and though there may be shortcomings in some of his visions of human relationships, these do not detract from the validity of his attempts to promote new ways of understanding the self in relation to the human community and the biosphere. In fact, his shortcomings do point to the reality that learning is a life long process, and that learning comes through the honesty of allowing ourselves to simply be who we are at any given point in space and time.

CHAPTER FOUR

ECOMYSTICISM: THE SELF, THE BODY AND THE COSMOS

In “Reinhabitation,” Gary Snyder explores what it will mean for people to redevelop close ties to the land. In this essay he argues that the direction our scientific studies of the earth point to is related to knowing the spirit of place:

> The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension. We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental--and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression is simple: feeling gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh). (*Place* 188)

This spiritual dimension of ecology brought about my desire to more closely examine the relationship between mysticism, poetry and ecology. Poetry has a strong link to mysticism, especially in relation to fusion, or a merging of two (or more) elements. In mystical poetry this fusion often occurs between the poet or persona and a spiritual figure, such as God or Buddha. Transcendental poetry also at times includes a "mystical" fusion of the poet or the poet’s persona with nature, which replaces the spiritual figure or is a representation of that figure.

By ecomysticism, I mean the space where "new" ecological paradigms and mystical perceptions of the world overlap. The vision for this chapter is a starting place for exploration of ecomysticism(s). I will begin with a look at mysticism from the western European Christian tradition, and I will follow that up with some ways in which I see ecomysticism meeting and diverging from this tradition. Ecomysticism, in many ways, is actually more closely linked to the spiritual/philosophical traditions of some Native American groups and Eastern peoples. I will finally take these ideas and attempt an ecomystically-oriented examination of some of the prose and poetry of Gary Snyder. Here again, I find that Snyder's work is so full of mystical relationship to the earth and its creatures and living systems that anything I may say in one chapter can only be a beginning.

In this chapter I will look at some definitions of mysticism. For starters it has been defined as:

> 1: the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics, 2: the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (as intuition or insight), 3 a: vague speculation: a belief without sound basis b: a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power. (*WWWebster*)

After considering various traditions of mysticism, I then explore how these understandings of mysticism fit in with ecology. A new understanding of mysticism must be developed, possibly in conjunction with the development of the term ecomysticism,

which would emphasize the interrelatedness or interconnectedness of all matter, the human and the more-than-human.

Mysticism is important in our response to the ecological crisis with which we are faced because, as Deval and Sessions have pointed out[1], the crisis is very much a spiritual and mythic crisis. For centuries now, Western knowledge of the earth and its systems has been based on scientific method, which has often been mistakenly considered an objective approach. Mythic traditions have been set aside as relics of an earlier, unenlightened time in human history. Even in the Christian tradition, which has continued to be a vital force in the lives of millions of people, there have been constant attempts to claim objectivity. A few years ago, I assigned a class to read a selection from N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. When we discussed the Kiowa origin myth (They entered the world through a hollow log.), quite a few of my students laughed. I asked what was so funny, and the most adventurous of them replied "How could they believe such a ridiculous story?" My answer was that it took as much believing to accept that the first man was made out of mud and the first woman out of a man's rib. Those who profess religion have to remind themselves of faith. Scientists are not eliminated from this reminder, as many recent works have shown.[2]

When it comes to the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, myth is essential, even though it may not always coincide with "objective" reality. David Barnhill, in his discussion of Snyder's ideas on ecological community, says of myth:

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[1] Bill Deval and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if the Earth Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985).

> I would prefer to begin with the hypothesis that there is some important wisdom involved in such mythic thinking which cannot be captured by our modern notions of objective reality. Myth, after all, articulates what is *psychologically* and *spiritually* real, what is essential in our relationships with the world. (198)

Mysticism is a route into this spiritual reality. When considering stories about our origins, why should it be more important to find the Objective Truth about them, if that is even possible, than to believe a story about them that has been passed down through generations--a story that may have wisdom reaching beyond scientific fact? Is it so bad if a story about the origins of the universe makes no mention of the "big bang," yet tells us about how we relate to the plants, animals, rivers or mountains around us?

What is Mysticism?

In order to set up an understanding of ecomysticism, I will first review some key points from Evelyn Underhill's classic introductory work, *Mysticism*. While the scope of mysticism in her book is limited to the European Christian tradition, and therefore leaves out Eastern mystical traditions, it is an excellent place to start, for several reasons. One is that this tradition, while perhaps not well known in our time, is couched in terms that are familiar to most Westerners. Another is that such traditions as Buddhism and some Native American cosmologies actually seem to be, in many ways, more closely in line with ecomysticism, the meaning of which will be more clear based on distinctions that can be drawn between it and the tradition described in Underhill's work.

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[2] See Frank Benjamin Golley's *A History of the Ecosystem Concept in Ecology* (New Haven: Yale UP,

Underhill begins by noting that the study of mysticism starts with the Self, for even though mystical experience is an individual experience, it "implies, indeed, the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that 'I, Me, Mine' which makes of man [sic] a finite isolated thing"[3] (71). She goes on to define mysticism as "the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else" (72). Mysticism is an experience in which the boundaries of the self are removed, if only for a short time. In the previous chapters I have sketched out some implications that such a removal of boundaries could have for new paradigms concerning the relation of the human species to the biosphere. A closer look at some of the particulars of spiritual mysticism will show how this removal is important from a religious point of view.

According to Underhill, five characteristics describe the mysticism found in the European-Christian tradition. The first is that "mysticism is practical, not theoretical" (82). The mystic focus is on action, rather than on merely believing. Underhill claims that the great mystics of the Western tradition did not merely know all the right doctrine, nor did they merely think about what they believed to be true--they acted from, or were caused to act by, intuitive forces within. She leaves the particulars of the type of action vague, stating only that these great mystics followed the "Mystic Way," but the following characteristics of mysticism point in the general direction of this action.

The second characteristic of mysticism is that it is "an entirely spiritual activity" (84). The mystic is one who does not pursue an "intuition of the Absolute" in order to

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1993) and Peter J. Bowler's *The Norton History of The Environmental Sciences* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992). These works clearly demonstrate the kinds of assumptions that scientists regularly make "on faith."

[3] Although Underhill uses the masculine pronoun when referring to the mystic in general, of her examples of great mystics there seem to be as many women as men.

gain some sort of personal power to be used for personal gain, but rather the mystic follows this intuition in order to realize a divine union in which s/he loses all distinction between the self and the Absolute (84). For Underhill, the Absolute is absolute truth, or God, with which the mystic has a personal encounter. While this encounter is personal, the mystic learns in this encounter that the self has disappeared, at least *during* the encounter, and the mystic has become one with the Absolute. Underhill does not, however, give any particulars of this Absolute truth, for, even though the mystics she cites do seem to believe in absolute truth, their individual experiences with this truth are expressed by personal and individual choice of language.

The third characteristic of mysticism is that the "business and method of Mysticism is Love" (85). Underhill explains that this is an important distinction between other "transcendental theory and practice." She describes it as "the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new knowledge, that is fruitful in the spiritual world as well as in the physical world" (85). By love, Underhill means a love that transcends likes or dislikes for things like Thai food or a game of dominoes, a love that is ultimately not concerned with self-gratification--this love is "the active, conative, expression of his [sic] will and desire for the Absolute." Mystic love is, then, a love that transcends concern for one's own well-being, perhaps even in some extreme cases of asceticism, a love that calls for a mortification of the physical self.

Underhill finds that a fourth characteristic is that mysticism "entails a definite Psychological Experience" (90). She explains:

> [Mysticism] shows itself not merely as an attitude of mind and heart, but as a form of organic life. It is not only a theory of the intellect or a hunger, however passionate, of the heart. It involves the organizing of the whole self, conscious and unconscious, under the spur of such hunger: a remaking of the whole character on high levels in the interests of the transcendental life. The mystics are emphatic in their statement that spiritual desires are useless unless they initiate this costly movement of the whole self towards the Real. (90)

Here it is as difficult to pin down exactly what she means by the "whole self" as it is to figure out exactly what she means by mystic love or "the Real." First, she claims that mysticism is a psychological experience; then she states that it is organic, or, not merely an "attitude of the mind." Further explaining the whole self, she includes the conscious and the unconscious. Nowhere does she mention the physical self to which these experiences are occurring. Perhaps it is taken for granted that the whole self includes the body, but it seems more likely that the whole self, according to Underhill, is heart, mind (conscious and unconscious), and whatever other transcendental parts of the self there may be, e.g. soul, spirit. In fact, the emphasis is upon the "interests of the transcendental life." Of course, this is not surprising, since in many of the Christian traditions there is an emphasis on the spiritual world as being the "real" world (because it is infinite or eternal), rather than the physical world of the senses (which is finite and transitory). In a way, the goal of mysticism is an intense transcendence, or escape from, the physical body.

The fifth and final characteristic of mysticism is that "true mysticism is never self-seeking." It is not a way to get personal kicks on a supernatural level:

> The mystic does not enter on his quest because he desires the happiness of the Beatific Vision, the ecstasy of union with the Absolute, or any other personal reward. The noblest of all passions, the passion for perfection for Love's sake, far outweighs the desire for transcendental satisfaction. (92)

This characteristic reiterates the mood that is present in all of the other characteristics, and reminds us that even though the rewards of mystical experience are great, even on a personal level, the aim of the mystic, thus the aim of mystical experience, is love of the Absolute.

Underhill also describes five phases of mystical experience that roughly parallel the characteristics of mystical experience. First, the self is awakened to the "consciousness of Divine Reality" (169). Here, there is a movement from "lower to higher levels of consciousness" and from self-centeredness to "world-consciousness" (176, 177). The self becomes intuitively and consciously aware that it is not, after all, the center of the universe. Where before, the universe is but a reflection of the self's thoughts, as consciousness shifts to a larger, or Absolute, vision of "reality," new relationships to and attitudes toward the world are suggested. This, taken with the mystical experience of becoming one with the Absolute, results in a spiritual shift in emphasis from the individual self to a larger Self within which the individual self exists.

The second phase is one of purification, in which the mystic eliminates "all those elements of normal experience which are not in harmony with reality . . . illusion, evil,

imperfection of any kind" (198). The mystic takes on the task of reordering his or her thoughts in order to shift from the false universe in which the self is central to a larger vision of the universe whose center is the Absolute. The Absolute as a name for the center does not really clarify what the new center of the universe is, but perhaps it is enough to say that it is not the self, or anything that can be appropriated by the self. Or perhaps there is no center of the universe, only the vast Absolute of which all is a part. In the end, as Underhill points out, the mystic is one who has mystical experience, not one who merely talks about it. In fact, a sixth characteristic of mysticism could well be that if such experiences really do meaningfully alter the universe for the mystic, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to communicate the particulars of these experiences to those who have not had the experience themselves.

A third phase occurs when the purification of the self has been extensive enough to detach one from the "things of sense" and connect one to the "ornaments of the spiritual marriage," when the vision of "Transcendent Order" returns to the mystic in an even more intense manner (169). This is followed by a fourth phase which entails the "final and compete" purification of the self, in which the "human instinct for personal happiness must be killed" (170). Then in the final phase "the Absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is *one* with it" (170). Again, the mystic, in order for mystical fusion with the Absolute to occur, must shed the physical body and the individual self. Of course this shedding can only be temporary, for at some point, presumably, the mystic returns to everyday experience and must exist in a physical body, but the revelations gained during mystical fusion can have a lasting impact on the

perception that the mystic has of her/his body and self. Once the knowledge of spiritual interconnectedness has been gained, the perception of the sensual world is forever altered.

Underhill explains this understanding of mysticism in far greater detail, but the central idea is that the boundaries of the individual self are destroyed, and that this change has two major spiritual results: (1) your self is not a thing, or there is no individual self in transcendent spiritual terms, and (2) you, along with everything else in the universe, exist within a larger Self, the Absolute. This is in fact two ways of saying the same thing, namely that the individual self is not isolated or finite in a spiritual sense. Therefore, any concerns for the individual self's well-being are of little or no importance in comparison to the well-being of the larger Self. The new "greatest" commandment then could be "love your neighbor, who is in fact your Self." Unstated in all of this discussion is that Jesus is the Absolute which becomes the center of this mystical universe, rather than the individual self. Since Jesus is considered to be the incarnation of God, his centrality to Christian Mysticism is a powerful link to ecomysticism, for even God chose to take on a physical body in order to enrich the physical and spiritual lives of humans.

Ecomysticism shares many characteristics with Christian mysticism, but there are some fundamental differences that result in profoundly different worldviews. Some of these differences are actually the same differences that are found between Christian and Eastern mystical traditions, most importantly, the idea of interbeing, or the interconnectedness of all matter, human and non-human.

What is Ecomysticism?

Ecomysticism also could be said to begin with the self; however, where a mystic may ask, "who am I, spiritually?" an ecomystic asks "who am I in relationship to the earth?" Ecomysticism critiques the idea that the human self is somehow other than and superior to the rest of the life forms and elements that make up the earth. Although each of us is undeniably a unique creature capable of creativity and originality, none of us exists independently of each other or independently of the ecosystems in which we live or the larger biosphere in which these ecosystems operate. While this seems to be obvious, for we have long known that we depend upon the earth for our food and shelter, strangely enough, there are countless ways in which our species has lost vital and meaningful connections to the physical earth upon which we live. Further, because we see the earth as a collection of tools or goodies for our exclusive use, we tend to view our physical bodies in the same way. The body has become the "tool" of the mind. The body is not who I am, it is merely a vehicle. The "real" me is my mind or soul or my higher consciousness. But if we are able to reclaim our bodies as parts of who we are, we must then ask: where does the body end, or what are its limits? For if we accept that we exist in interdependence with the rest of the ecosystem, and then take a close look at our bodies, it becomes difficult to determine where the individual body "ends" and where the "other" begins.

Ecomysticism shares some characteristics with mysticism. Like mystical experience, ecomystical experience is practical, not theoretical. Although it has profound

effects on our philosophic outlook, ecomystical experience must be rooted in flesh and blood. Rather than merely acknowledging biological connections to the rest of the earth, the ecomystic experiences those connections by seeking the daily life implications of these connections. Where Underhill talks of a Mystic Way, ecomystics might talk of something like reinhabitation or the bioregional way. Jim Dodge put it this way:

> To understand natural systems is to begin an understanding of the self, its common and particular essences--literal self-interest in its barest terms . . . When we destroy a river, we increase our thirst, ruin the beauty of free-flowing water, forsake the meat and spirit of the salmon, and lose a little bit of our souls. (6)

Dodge also adds that

> Theories, ideas, notions--they have their generative and reclamative values, and certainly a loveliness, but without the palpable intelligence of practice they remain hovering in the nether regions of nifty entertainments or degrade into more flamboyant fads and diversions like literary movements and hula-hoops. Practice is what puts the heart to work. (10)

So, while mysticism is, according to Underhill, an entirely spiritual activity, ecomysticism does not build a wall between the spiritual and the physical. They are interwoven.

In two important ways ecomysticism is very much like mysticism. One is that the driving force behind ecomystical experience draws one away from pursuits of selfish power and tends toward what E. O. Wilson calls biophilia, or a love for life itself--not

individual life, but life in all of its diversity and interconnectedness, which includes things not normally thought of as being alive, such as rocks, water and air. The other is that deep ecomystical experience brings the ecomystic to a fusion with the ecological equivalent of the Absolute, which is at least the solar system, if not the entire universe. This fusion is both physical and spiritual. The body is a part of this interconnectedness, yet there is a spiritual level of experience going on simultaneously, because the living force common to all things is recognized. Everything is *inspired*, or a part of the breathing of the earth.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram explores the role of the shaman in tribal culture. After spending some time in Bali and Nepal, Abram felt that anthropologists generally focused on the shaman's "rapport with 'supernatural' entities," viewing the shaman as one who was responsible for coordinating the ritual life of the local people based upon local superstition. The shaman kept up good relations between the people and the spirits. Abram argues that this overlooks the ecological aspect of the shaman's work. This oversight, he explains, is because of "the modern, civilized assumption that the natural world is largely determinate and mechanical, and that that which is regarded as mysterious, powerful, and beyond human ken must therefore be of some other, nonphysical realm *above* nature, 'supernatural'" (8). This is compounded by the Christian assumption that "only human beings have intelligent souls, and that the other animals, to say nothing of trees and rivers, were created for no other reason than to serve humankind" (8). In contrast, the tribal cultures that Abram encountered believed that human consciousness is only "one form of awareness among many others" (9). The

work of the shaman, then, is to serve as an "intermediary" between human consciousness and the animate non-human world:

> The traditional or tribal shaman, I came to discern, acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth. By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies, and "journeys," he ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it--not just materially but with prayers, propitiations, and praise. (7)

So, for these cultures, the physical realm and the spiritual realm do not have the hard separateness that our culture has imagined to exist. Interconnectedness on an ecomystical level thus has implications for the individual self, for the human community, and for our perceptions of the biotic community.

At this point, it should be clear that in the move from the traditional Christian mysticism to ecomysticism, there is a shift in emphasis. Spiritual reality is important to both, but for ecomysticism, physical reality is a vital part of spirituality. For this reason ecomysticism can be a valuable neologism. For if the environmental crisis is in part a spiritual crisis, an ecological mysticism is appropriate. Ecological mysticism reminds us that we do not exist independent of spirit, and we do not exist independent of the earth. If ecomysticism is only a neologism, however, it is useless. Whatever name we choose to

call the path of reclaiming a spiritual and physical connection to the earth, we must begin the journey.

Ecomysticism does not call for an abandonment of Christianity, nor does it demand a fusion of Christianity and ecological awareness. There are many worldviews that are compatible with ecomysticism. For example, in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, there are over twenty essays which explore ways in which Buddhism can offer a healthy way for humans to express spiritual and physical interconnectedness with the earth. This book is just one of a series, *Religions of the World and Ecology*, published by Harvard University Press, which also includes *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, and *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*. Also, the creation spirituality movement has offered new Christian approaches to the ecological crisis and the spiritual crisis that in many ways seems to be related to the ecological crisis. In *Deep Ecology*, Deval and Sessions embrace many spiritual traditions, including Buddhism and Christianity. The point is not choosing one tradition over the other, rather it is that, as Deval and Sessions have stated, "the natural and supernatural worlds are inseparable; each is intrinsically a part of the other. Humans and natural entities are in constant spiritual interchange and reciprocity" (97).

Ecomystical Visions of Gary Snyder's Poetry and Poetics

As I mentioned in the introduction, there is nothing new in noting the ecological or the mystical in Snyder's poetry or prose. However, the fusion of these two realms presents a paradigm for living that is quite different from a worldview that is only

ecological or only mystical. Much of his thought and practice in this area is a blending of Native American tradition and Eastern philosophy. Snyder's prose offers some "plain talk" examples of this fusion.

In a 1969 essay, "Some Yips & Barks in the Dark," Snyder explains his particular version of open verse:

> Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field-dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part of the work of the poet. A scary chaos fills the heart as "spir"itual breath--in"spir"ation; and is breathed out into the thing-world as a poem. (357)

This sounds similar to descriptions of some of the Christian mystics' encounters with the "Absolute"--a dark-night-of-the-soul encounter with something that is not necessarily a "thing" that can be seen or comprehended rationally. Snyder explains that, like the mystic, the poet does not seek to control the mystic encounter. There is an "it" that is spiritual and full of breath. As "it" enters the world through the poet's breath, "it" enters the realm of words and things. This hearkens back to the first lines of the *Tao Te Ching*,

> The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
> The Named is the mother of all things. (LaoTzu, *Way* 97)

Before the distinctions and discriminations of words appear, there is a sense in which "all is one." Wing-Tsit Chan comments, "To Lao Tzu, Tao is nameless and is the simplicity without names; when names arise, that is, when the simple oneness of Tao is split up into

individual things with names, it is time to stop" (Lao Tzu, *Way* 97). Of course, the poet does not stop here, nor did Lao Tzu for that matter, but to begin with an understanding that not all knowledge can be forced into intelligible language is the key. If it happens at all, the poet must allow it to happen in and on its own terms.

Following a similar mode of understanding, Snyder's essay "The Yogin and the Philosopher" begins:

> We live in a universe "one turn" in which, it is widely felt, all are one and at the same time all are many. . . . As the discriminating, self-centered awareness of civilized humans has increasingly improved their material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved them further and further from a spontaneous feeling of being part of the natural world. . . . This brings us to the use of terms like "the rights of nonhuman nature" or questions such as "do trees have standing?" From the standpoint of "all are one," the questions need never arise. (*Place* 47)

The essay begins with a paradox: all are one, all are many. We seem to have a handle on the concept "all are many," even though the implications of that diversity are not always first on our minds when we make environmental decisions. And as for "all are one," since the 1960s, many Americans have turned eastward for wisdom--and many are familiar enough with the terminology to get a laugh out of the joke

> What did the Zen monk say to the hotdog vendor?[4]

[4] Make me one with everything.

Familiarity with the "all are one" concept makes it a useful paradigm for ecological understanding as well as spiritual understanding. The implications of being "one with everything" on an ecological level will not hit home unless these implications are brought to everyday life. Snyder explains that the philosopher "speaks the language of reason," which can only go so far with a certain type of understanding, while the yogin, through meditation, hopes to "penetrate deeper in understanding than the purely rational function will allow" (48-49). Reading or philosophizing about ecological interdependence will get you somewhere, but until these things take hold of you life, even down to an awareness of your breathing, perhaps, your understanding will only be available for coffee-table talk or lectures. Not that you have to meditate and practice breathing to be ecologically conscious--do whatever *you* must do to reconnect physically and spiritually with the earth. The yogin balances meditation with action. According to Snyder, the yogin, the shaman and the poet take on similar roles within culture--namely the business of giving voice to the songs of the nonhuman powers: "wilderness and unconscious become analogous: she who knows and is at ease in one will be at home in the other" (50). Again, all are one, all are many. The importance for the present, Snyder says, is that

> People of goodwill who cannot see a *reasonable* mode of either listening to, or speaking for, nature except by analytical and scientific means must surely learn to take this complex, profound, moving, and in many ways highly appropriate worldview of the yogins, shamans, and ultimately all of your ancestors into account. One of the few modes of speech that gives us

> access to that other yogic or shamanistic view (in which all are one and all are many, and the many are precious) is poetry and song. (51)

Having had the mystical experience of "all is one" does not mean that one has become or will become a poet. However, Snyder insists that the ancient links between music, dance, religion and philosophy are not arbitrary and that the poet is able to "[steer] a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable non-verbal states--and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language" (*Earth*, 118).

If Snyder is not only a poet who talks about the relationship between mysticism, poetry, and the nonhuman, but is a poet who actually writes from this experience, it should be clear in his poetry. Nothing prohibits a poet from saying just about anything about his or her work—the bottom line is, are these experiences real?

His poem "Piute Creek," from *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, is one example of an experience in which being immersed in the natural world causes a mystical purification, which in turn enables deeper levels of awareness to be reached by the mystic. The first stanza sets up the place of the encounter:

> One granite ridge
> A tree, would be enough
> Or even a rock, a small creek,
> A bark shred in a pool.
> Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted
> Tough trees crammed
> In thin stone fractures

A huge moon on it all, is too much.

The mind wanders. A million

Summers, night air still and the rocks

Warm. (8)

It appears that the speaker's perception is being flooded with stimuli from the backcountry. The mind is unable to concentrate on anything; it is all "too much." Too much what, or for what? There is a recognizable power in this place, so much power that even a "bark shred" would be enough. For what?

Sky over endless mountains.

All the junk that goes with being human

Drops away, hard rock wavers

Even the heavy present seems to fail

This bubble of a heart.

Words and books

Like a small creek off a high ledge

Gone in the dry air.

Something about the place has confounded the speaker's ability to hold on to "all the junk that goes with being human," which includes time ("the heavy present"), the self ("bubble of a heart"), and formal learning ("words and books"). The second stanza elaborates: "A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen. (19-21)". This is difficult to decipher, but one possibility, based on the previous lines, is that the world of meaning, as we are accustomed to view it, is nothing but a reflection of

the mind's thoughts about that world. Things mean something only because we have fallen into the physical/mental/spiritual habit of viewing them this way. What we see in the world of everyday life is a reflection of our thoughts about the world of everyday life.

Interestingly, an opposite interpretation is possible, and in fact does not preclude the preceding option. The speaker and his/her mind is perhaps being seen by the place itself; by the moon, or by the creatures which the speaker mentions at the end of the second stanza:

> A flick
>
> In the moonlight
>
> Slips into Juniper shadow:
>
> Back there unseen
>
> Cold proud eyes
>
> Of Cougar or Coyote
>
> Watch me rise and go.

Patrick Murphy comments that

> even as one could say that a human looking at Piute Creek is civilized nature studying wild nature, the reverse can occur. . . . At the end Snyder is also remarking that the speaker is but a visitor to this particular part of wild nature, not a resident. It is appropriate, then, that he [sic] approach the place not only with awe but also with deference to its inhabitants. (51)

So, as with the Christian mystical tradition, in which the self simultaneously merges with and bows in awe of the Absolute, so here the speaker's ecomystical encounter demands similar understandings concerning the relationship of the self to the larger whole.

"The Canyon Wren," which appears in *Axe Handles* and in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, could be considered an ecomystical poem in which Snyder 1) gives voice to the nonhuman, in this case a bird and 2) relates how the song of the canyon wren was a part of a split-second-power-vision in which everything seemed to come to a halt. In this suspension, the speaker experiences first hand what Dogen refers to in his writings on mountains and rivers: "mountains flow / water is the place of the dragon / it does not flow away"[5] ("Canyon Wren," *Mountains* 90-91). The poem's setting is a rafting trip that Snyder took with some friends on the Stanislaus River just before the rapids were lost because of the building of the New Mellones Dam. The poem begins with a physical description of the cliffs, boulders, and a hawk that "cuts across that narrow sky." The second stanza introduces the canyon wren:

> we paddle forward, backstroke, turn,
> spinning through eddies and waves
> stairsteps of churning whitewater.
> Above the roar
> hear the song of a Canyon Wren. (90)

[5] The preceding quote is from Snyder's poem, but it is also an echo of Dogen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*: "Now when dragons and fish see water as a palace, it is just like human beings seeing a palace. They do not think it flows. If an outsider tells them, 'What you see as a palace is running water,' the dragons and fish will be astonished, just as we are when we hear the words, 'Mountains flow.' Nevertheless, there may be some dragons and fish who understand that the columns and pillars of palaces and pavilions are flowing water." (Dogen, 104).

As the speaker's body is absorbed in the task of keeping afloat, in a sense becoming one with the river, the voice of the canyon wren penetrates, even through the roaring water.

A smooth stretch, drifting and resting.

Hear it again, delicate downward song

ti ti ti ti tee tee tee

descending through ancient beds.

Now, in the calmer river, the song continues. Then the poem shifts to a recollection of a Chinese poet who wrote of a moment of stillness in the midst of shooting rapids. Everything stood still. "I stare at the water: / it moves with unspeakable slowness." The song of this bird has triggered a similar moment for the speaker. Is the speaker floating by in the flowing of the river, or is the earth flowing by? The rational answer is that the river is flowing. Dogen, the Zen master's answer is "mountains flow, water . . . does not flow away." In this moment, perception is turned on its head. That night they sleep near the stream. The whole time the voice of the canyon wren is near. The poem ends "These songs that are here and gone, / here and gone, / to purify our ears." What about the ears needs purification? Is there something amiss with what or how the ears usually perceive? Or is it that the sound of the water and the song of the wren have merged into a drone which, over the days spent immersed in it, changes the speaker's awareness of place? The poem points to a mystical communion that was a physical communion as well as a communion that involved the spirit of the place. Snyder follows the *Axe Handles* version of the poem with some explanatory notes, which end: "The song of the Canyon Wren stayed with us the whole voyage; at China Camp, in the dark, I wrote this poem. *April,*

40081, Stanislaus River, Camp 9 to Parrot's Ferry" (112). The poem then is a product of that particular experience which Snyder roots in space and time. Ironically, that space is now part of a past time and that home of the canyon wren is now submerged by a reservoir. Perhaps the speaker's knowledge that this place was soon to be altered by human technology gave special emphasis to the bird's song and the music of the river. The imminent "death" of this place made the voyage a powerful experience and it is no wonder that the speaker has a mystical encounter with bird and river.

A shorter example of a blending of the land and spirit is the poem "24:IV:40075, 3:30PM, n. of Coaldale, Nevada, A Glimpse through a Break in the Storm of the Summit of the White Mountains." The title contains more words than the poem proper:

O Mother Gaia

sky cloud gate milk snow

wind-void-word

I bow in roadside gravel

Without the title, the context, and perhaps thus some of the power of the poem would be lost. Patrick Murphy has pointed out that it "can be analyzed formally and appreciated for the mastery of its technique, but it is more appropriate to respect the religious sensibility with which Snyder has imbued it by means of a meditative reading rather than a formal explication" (145). This attitude toward the poem is a reminder that poems written from a mystical space and time are not necessarily meant for literary scrutiny, although this does not imply that they are simple and straightforward. Snyder has also said of the space between poem and reader that the "wider the gap, the more difficult; and the greater the

delight when it crosses." However, he adds: "If the poem becomes too elliptical it ceases to be a poem in any usual sense. Then it may be a mantra, a koan, or a dharani. To be used as part of a larger walking, singing, dancing, or meditating practice" ("Yips" 357). Whether or not this poem is still a "poem in the usual sense," reading it as a reverent prayer to the earth, Gaia, is infinitely more important than reading *about* it.

The first poem of the "new" section of *No Nature*, "How Poetry Comes to Me" is a description of the mystical nature of Snyder's writing. It is not surprising to find that Snyder uses metaphors of landscape:

> It comes blundering over the
> Boulders at night, it stays
> Frightened outside the
> Range of my campfire
> I go to meet it at the
> Edge of the light (361)

The Poem is here an entity that must be met on the edge of normal, everyday consciousness/awareness. In fact, it will not enter the "light" which seems to be the place where Snyder is waiting in silence for the Poem to arrive. The Poem, Snyder says is frightened. Of what? Perhaps of the harsh light of language, or as Snyder puts it, "the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language" (*Earth*, 118). What is beyond this edge of light is not the usual landscape of the daylight hours. In the night it is a place of power. In this sense, the poem is reminiscent of the descriptions of Castaneda's treks with Don Juan into the desert in search of the allies. What Snyder describes is also very similar to

the vision quest of the Native American tradition, or the power-vision-in-solitude. These metaphors of landscape are an important link between his poetry and its source, as he describes in one of the final sections of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, in the poem "Earth Verse:"

> Wide enough to keep you looking
> Open enough to keep you moving
> Dry enough to keep you honest
> Prickly enough to make you tough
> Green enough to go on living
> Old enough to give you dreams (148)

The earth itself is the source for this poem, which has the ring and rhythm of a Native American chant. The physical reality of the earth is not just a place, but a site of wisdom. The earth is not ultimately knowable in a completely rational sense. It does, however offer its wisdom and dreams to those who seek it. And this goes hand in hand with his emphasis on reinhabitation and bioregionalism. As he puts it in the final stanza of the final poem in *No Nature*, "Ripples on the surface,"

> The vast wild
> the house, alone.
> The little house in the wild,
> the wild in the house.
> Both forgotten.

No nature

Both together, one big empty house. (381)

These lines are most likely the fruit of living at his home in Kitkitdizze, which is "open to the elements" during the warm weather, and even in the cold weather is not an airtight urban home-box. Living in such a house is not necessarily the equivalent to the usual image of a mystical experience, but living in such a manor/manner certainly lends itself to the kind of experiences that condition Snyder for ecomystical encounters. "Nature" has lost its meaning as "other," since the physical, mental, and spiritual walls of the self have been changed into something more like a thin membrane which allows for interpenetration.

Gary Snyder's poetry is full of ecomystical encounters. By placing dual emphasis on the ecological and the mystical aspect of poetry such as Snyder's, the reader may reclaim a spiritual relationship with the earth. There are many other poems by Snyder which would be served well by ecomystical readings, as well as many other poets. However, when it comes to the spiritual aspect of our relationship with the earth, merely academically acknowledging the ecomystical aspects of any poem is to turn spirit into something that it should not be, namely, the object of cold-blooded scientific study. If our experience of such poetry does not lead us to our own ecomystical experience, perhaps, to a large degree, that poetry has failed. And, whether or not poets, mystics or scholars use the *term* ecomysticism, the pursuit of awareness of the spiritual connections between the human species and the nonhuman is of vital importance.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARDS A SNYDERIAN VERSION OF ECOPOETICS

In this final chapter I will examine the concepts of *ecopoetics* and *ecopoetry*. The relationship between ecological paradigms and the poetry of Gary Snyder has received much attention in the past twenty years, and practically all of the criticism devoted to ecopoetry and ecopoetics sooner or later makes reference to Snyder's work by way of example. Two questions immediately come to mind: What are ecopoetics and ecopoetry? Why is it important to invent such critical terms?

Put simply, ecopoetics and ecopoetry are poetics and poetry that are steeped in ecosystems awareness. The very nature of these terms and others such as ecocriticism, signified by the prefix *eco-*, means that the minds, bodies, and spirits of the ecocritic and the reader of ecocriticism will always return to the earth and the household meaning of the Greek root *οικος*. When ecopoetry or ecopoetics become only academic subjects, they have already ceased to be of much use. The connection to community (human and non-human) implies that the poetry will find a way into the community, rather than catering to the whims of the scholars. So if ecopoetics and ecopoetry are to be meaningful areas of critical study, critics and readers will need to take care that such theory does not displace the actual experience of interrelation with the biosphere.

The preceding chapters have been part of my own attempt to discover what *ecopoets*, *ecopoetry* and *ecopoetics* are and what they do. Following the exploration of these chapters, ecopoetics can be defined as an understanding of poetry in which the form and content of the poem draw attention to new understandings of the human self as well as new understandings of the human relationship with the earth. Ecopoetry does this by (1) examining the barriers our culture describes as existing between the human self and the environment; (2) reclaiming the body as integral to "real" human experience, giving the natural equality with the supernatural, and in fact, even challenging that dichotomy; (3) recounting the experience of ecomystical fusion, or those moments when the notion of the physical self as distinct from the non-human is eliminated on physical and spiritual levels—those moments when the spiritual impact of the physical notion of interrelatedness is most clear. The notion of the self as that which is distinct from everything and everyone else has, for a multitude of reasons, resulted in a rift between the human species and the earth. The emphasis I have placed on "understandings of the human self" highlights the point that healthy relationships between humans and the biosphere necessitate and presuppose the understanding that the human self is not independent of the biosphere.

The following section will highlight the emphases of others as they have explored ecopoetics. While their terminology often differs from mine, this is because there are many ways to describe both the crisis that our species has created and the causes for that crisis. What all of the critics agree upon is that there is a rift between humans and the

biosphere, whether that rift be on a physical, psychological or spiritual level, or some combination thereof.

Tracing the Terminology

In 1996, *The Ecocriticism Reader* posed a challenge to literary studies by pointing out the neglect on the part of the humanities to engage ecological issues. In the introduction, Cheryll Glotfelty outlined some directions that ecocriticism might explore, and among the new terminology of this field, she included without explanation the term *ecopoetics*, which she stated was "currently in circulation" (xx). The closest the collection ever really gets to a statement on ecological poetics is a portion of William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism."[1] Here Reuckert makes use of ecological principles to form a definition of poetry, by which he means literature that has poetic qualities, as well as poetry in the stricter sense:[2]

> A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow.
>
> Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life.
>
> Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination. (108)

[1] This essay originally appeared in the winter 1978 issue of the *Iowa Review* (9.1). Rueckert is generally credited with coining the term *ecocriticism*.
[2] Examples he offers are *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, and *Song of Myself*, but he also includes other forms of art such as a painting or a symphony.

He admits to taking these ideas from "a great variety of sources," but the idea here is remarkably similar to the idea that Gary Snyder expressed in "On 'As for Poets,'" a note on the poem that closes the poetry portion of *Turtle Island*:

> *Air* is our breath, spirit, inspiration; a flow which becomes speech when "sounded"—the curling back on the same thrust" is close to what is meant in the Japanese word *Fushi* . . . knot, or whorl in the grain, the word for song.
>
> *Fire* must have a fuel and the heart's fuel is love. The love that makes poetry burn is not just the green of this spring, but draws on the ancient web of sympathetic, compassionate, and erotic acts that lies behind our very existence, a stored energy in our genes and dreams—fossil love a sly term for that deep buried sweetness brought to conscious thought. . . . Poetry is for all men and women. The power within—the more you give the more you have to give—will be our source when coal and oil are long gone, and atoms are left to spin in space. (*Turtle* 114)

Both Rueckert and Snyder find in poetry a life-sustaining force, in which life is not merely the intellectual, nor merely the spiritual, but also the physical. Poetry is rooted in the ways in which our bodies and spirits work together to produce—or rather, channel—song. Rueckert goes on to compare thermodynamic models to the relationship between creative imagination and language. He finds that the source of all energy in literature is the creative imagination and that language is "only one (among many) vehicles for the storing of creative energy" (Glotfelty 109). The manner in which the sun can be said to

be the source of all life in our biosphere is analogous, he claims, to the relationship of poetry to the life of the human community: "Unlike nature, which has a single ultimate source of energy, the human community would seem to have many suns, resources, renewable and otherwise, to out-sun the sun itself" (109). But Rueckert also points out that there is a connection between these two sources of energy, for poetic energy sources seem to have an impact on the manner in which we make use of nature's energy sources:

> We need to discover ways of using this renewable energy-source to keep that other ultimate energy-source (upon which all life in the natural biosphere, and human communities, including human life, depends) flowing into the biosphere. We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere. . . . What a poem is saying is probably always less important that what it is doing and how—in the deep sense—it coheres. Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems. The first Law of Ecology—that everything is connected to everything else—applies to poems as well as to nature. The concept of the interactive field was operative in nature, ecology and poetry long before it ever appeared in criticism. (109-110)

So, while ecosystemic interrelatedness is nothing new in the realm of poetry, it is not something that has, up until the last twenty to thirty years, been much acknowledged, or perhaps even noticed, by the academic community. It is certainly not an accident that the

connections between poetry and ecology began to be noticed at a time when ecological crises were and are immediate and pressing.

It was nearly twenty years after Rueckert's essay that the term *ecopoetics* began to be used in academic circles, and is still a developing notion. That is not to say that for twenty years there was no thinking along those lines. In fact in 1985, and in a 1996 revised edition, John Elder brought forth his excellent study of nature poetry, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*. Elder demonstrates connections and divergences among nature poetry from the British and American Romantic movements to Post-World War II ecological poets. He examines the work of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mathew Arnold, Robinson Jeffers, T. S. Eliot, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, William Everson, Denise Levertov, A. R. Ammons, and Mary Oliver in order to demonstrate how there has been a shift in poetic understanding toward acknowledging connections between ideas that have hitherto been seen as irreconcilably opposed, such as *culture* and *wilderness*, *imagination* and *landscape*, or *science* and *poetry*. As with Rueckert's work, Elder's book highlights the importance of poetry in human culture's response to the earth and the ecological crisis.

In 1997, Lothar H□☿nnighausen's essay "Ecopoetical Poetry: The Example of Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry" appeared in *Poetics in the Poem: Critical Essays on American Self-Reflexive Poetry*. In this essay, H□☿nnighausen takes a look at some self-reflexive poetry produced by these two writers in which they discuss the poetic endeavor of infusing the work of the poet with ecological issues such as bioregionalism and biodiversity. H□☿☿nnighausen insists that poetological poems do not "only explore

matters of poetic form" and that no poetics—ecological or otherwise—is independent of ideology and even politics. He points out that Snyder's understanding of "poetry as song" is rooted in ancient shamanistic practice, which emphasizes the role of breath and voice rather than rigid formal constructs. Formal considerations are subservient to breath and voice (244-245). Snyder does make use of formal elements such as rhythm and rhyme often in his work, but rather than these elements being present in the poem, as in a sonnet or a villanelle, these elements work in a similar fashion to the "open form" poetics of Creeley, Duncan and Olson. H□ɣnnighausen's focus, as is indicated in the title of the collection, remains on self-reflexive understandings of ecopoetical ecopoetry, and in fact he states that "ecopoetics of the best kind" is "poetological reflection and the poetic process running parallel with the experience of nature" (254). By this he means that the clearest and most powerful examples of ecopoetics occur when the poet reflects on the ecopoetical process through the vehicle of the "experience of nature." And this particular type of ecopoetics emphasizes, by example, the very processes that are a part of the experience of both crafting and reading ecopoetry. H□ɣnnighausen does also make mention of prose statements relating to ecopoetics, such as Snyder's *The Real Work* or *Earth House Hold*, and makes use of these in his study of Snyder and Berry.

In 1999, Leonard M. Scigaj's *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* became the first book-length study of ecopoetry and ecopoetics. Scigaj's work is a wonderfully thorough exploration of ecopoetry as a sub-genre, and his extension of this study to the poetry of A. R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, W. S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder

makes this work a vastly important checkpoint for any future study in ecopoetry and ecopoetics.

The first chapter provides an overview of the current ecological crises that we are facing, and in this chapter Scigaj discusses the connection of nature writing to the ways in which we respond to these crises. He describes ecopoetry as a subgroup of environmental writing, which is in itself a subgroup of nature writing. The distinguishing characteristic of ecopoetry, according to Scigaj, is that it has been "influenced by a sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the areas of energy/flow, cyclic renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem" (11). While authors involved in nature writing and environmental writing are certainly interested in types of relationships between the human species and the biosphere, ecopoetry takes this interest one step further by embracing the various outcomes of the interdependent nature of ecosystem thinking. Scigaj offers the following definition of ecopoetry: "poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems" (37). In contrast, environmental poetry, Scigaj explains, does not concentrate on this "interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems."

These cyclic feedback systems, or loops, are parts of the "control" system of an ecosystem, although this control is far too complex to monitor comprehensively. An example of feedback is the effect that bison have on grasslands. The bison feed upon and trample the plants, hindering growth and causing negative influence in the ecosystem, but their saliva and manure provide nutrients that stimulate growth and thus positively

influence the same system. The link between the grass and the bison forms what is known as a feedback system. Feeding, trampling, drooling, and defecation provide information to the ecosystem, though this information flow is only a minute fraction of the information that flows through and influences a system as complex as an ecosystem. Fritjof Capra offers the simpler example of the experience of learning to ride a bike:

> At first, when we learn to do so, we find it difficult to monitor the feedback from the continual changes of balance and to steer the bicycle accordingly. Thus a beginner's front wheel tends to oscillate strongly. But as our expertise increases, our brain monitors, evaluates, and responds to the feedback automatically, and the oscillations of the front wheel smooth out into a straight line. (57-58)

It may be that the emphasis that ecopoets place on feedback is due to a large extent to the changes in ecosystems thinking over the past century, but is also a reflection of the non-scientific understandings that are present in many aboriginal groups. The human species is not the center of anything in ecological terms, unless we consider that our species is at the center of ozone depletion, acid rain, and global warming. But, on the more specific day-to-day level of ecosystem life, we are just one part, no more important than any other part, even if our part is in some ways more noticeably significant. The very nature of feedback systems is that one part of the system impacts another part of the system, which impacts another part of the system, and eventually returns to the first part.

The ecopoet, then, explores the ways in which humans participate for good or for ill in these feedback systems. And it could thus be said that ecopoetry itself plays a part in

the feedback. Environmental poetry, according to the distinction made by Scigaj, "reveres nature and often focuses on particular environmental issues," but does not concentrate on feedback systems (37). Ecopoets also stand apart from some of the more academic poets because the ecopoets do not

> valorize the completed poem as modernist product . . . instead they want the poem to challenge and reconfigure the reader's perceptions so to put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment of firsthand experience within nature's supportive second skin and to become more responsible about that necessary second skin. (41)

Related to these understandings of ecopoetry, Scigaj introduces a new term, *r*[illegible]*f*[illegible]*rance*, from the French *se r*[illegible]*f*[illegible]*rer*, "to relate or refer oneself to" (38). He explains that any text informed by *r*[illegible]*f*[illegible]*rence* "involves (1) reaching a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the limits of language, (2) referring one's perception beyond the printed page to nature, to the referential origin of all language, and (3) in most cases achieving an atonement or at-one-ment with nature" (38). This seems to represent Scigaj's response to the Gallicisms of Derrida and the implication of Derrida's insistence that any meaning in language is always deferred. Language is limited, but ecopoets find language to spring from the natural world which includes humans, but also much more. Human speech can thus be considered one of the many forms of feedback in the larger system, and ecopoets purposefully take advantage of this.

Ecopoetics in Snyder's Prose and Poetry

By examining Snyder's essays, introductions to his poetry volumes, interviews, and poetry it is possible to distill a Snyderian version of ecopoetics. In general, his work is a close look at relationships, and three of the most frequently mentioned are the relationship between poet and biosphere, between poet and community, and between community and biosphere. The key to each of these relationships is that, for Snyder, they are only possible through direct experience. The ecopoet can only write from a direct experience of the earth and a direct experience of community. The community cannot rely upon the poet to shoulder the responsibility of knowing the earth, nor can the community expect to know the earth merely by listening to the voice of the poet.

Snyder's understanding of the poet is akin to the shamanistic tradition of some native peoples. In several instances he has stated, "As a poet I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the upper Paleolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe" (*Myths* viii). Snyder's vision of time is much larger than thinking in years, decades, or even centuries. He has attempted to develop a feel for time that takes into account the last 40,000 years, truly a geologic time scale. This unusual view of time is of course not practical for the pace at which our culture is currently running, but the poet/shaman's work is to become steeped in the larger rhythm, and to call the community back to this rhythm by means of the creative imagination. But, he also adds, "it's not in time at all that we study our world and ourselves. There's no close or far" (viii). As poet/shaman, Snyder uses "the shamanistic terminology of the magic of words and what that is, the mantric efficacy of sound, and

the genres of poetry as derived from a Tribal concept: essentially work songs, power vision songs, love songs, courting songs, death songs, war songs, healing songs" (Faas 120). Snyder, as a poet, seeks ways to make these traditional songs meaningful in the present, for they are a vital part of the life of the community: "'Poetry' as the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels common to all who listen" (*Earth* 117).

The preceding definition comes from Snyder's essay "Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique." If this is a description of ecopoetry, then the ecopoet must speak from personal experience, but in a way that reaches a larger audience. To an extent Snyder's poetry has worked in this way. He dedicated his book *Axe Handles* to San Juan Ridge, which is a double dedication to the land where he lives and the people who live there. Many of the poems call people by name and mention specifics of place. He has also highlighted

> the importance of a sense of community, a need for the poet to identify with *real* people, not a faceless audience. There should be less concern with publishing, more with reading. A reading is a kind of communion. I think the poet articulates the semi-known for the Tribe. That is close to the ancient function of the shaman. (5)

If the ecopoet is to turn the community's attention to the ecosystems in which they live, the poet must know the people and the land. The poetry must be written out of and for

direct experience. Scott McLean, a resident of San Juan Ridge, comments that the poems in *Axe Handles* remind him

> that one cannot read Gary's poetry from the past fifteen years without being constantly aware of how much it is an expression of community life, and how it must be first seen within the context of the community of the San Juan Ridge. This is not to say that the poetry speaks only to a small circle of friends; it is to say that Gary's poetry has the authenticity and currency it does because of his profound rootedness in place, and his work argues that if one wants to touch the deepest levels of our humanity, one must learn within the relationships of responsibility that bind family, community, and place. (132)

Even though Snyder's poetry is rooted in place, and even though it is not limited to those who are a part of his local community, Snyder would argue that more local poetry needs to spring up, poetry that speaks to a local audience as well as a larger audience. Local is primary, for that is where the "real work" takes place. The ecopoet unleashes a type of energy that the community life is dependent upon and attempts to illuminate the mythic aspect of the community life. He says in "Poetry, Community & Climax," for instance, that poetry

> is written and read for real people: it should be part of the gatherings where we make decisions about what to do about uncontrolled growth, or local power plants, and who's going to be observer at the next county supervisor's meeting. A little bit of music is played by the guitarists and

> five-string banjo players, and some poems come down from five or six people who are really good—speaking to what is happening *here*. They shine a little ray of myth on things; memory turning to legend. (*Real* 168)

In other words, poetry is just one part of a shift in local politics, a shift that results in meetings that are empowering and encouraging, rather than the mistaken optimism of the usual city council meeting. All this springs from what Snyder other poets begin to rediscover in the San Francisco Renaissance. The Six Gallery reading, he stated in a 1964 radio interview, "reminded everybody that the excitement of poetry is a communal, social, human thing, and that poems aren't meant to be read in the quiet of your little room all by yourself with a dictionary at hand, but are something to be excitedly enjoyed in a group and be turned on by" (Allen 13). This understanding of poetry has thus been central to the work he has done over the past thirty years.

But the new understanding of community that came out of the ecology movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s widened the scope of the community to which or for which the poet was speaking. The "great earth sangha," Snyder mentions at the end of his poem "O Waters" is the community of the biosphere, an extension of the Buddhist name for the religious community, the extension based on the Buddhist understanding of interbeing, or the interconnectedness of all beings, human and nonhuman, including animals, plants, rocks, water, sun, moon, etc. (*Turtle* 73). And in order to speak to and from this expanded notion of community, the ecopoet must be steeped in direct experience of the nonhuman, or to put it in the positive terminology of the Sioux, direct

experience of the "creeping people, and the standing people, and the swimming people" (*Turtle* 108).

Knowing nature is Snyder's big picture for his poetry, as he made clear in his 1992 collection of new and selected works, *No Nature*. The title is a pun on several levels, one of which is the suspicious idea that humans can know nature well enough to develop technical solutions to the ecological crisis. In his introduction he touches on the difficulty for the poet, or anyone else for that matter, of developing an understanding of nature:

> . . . we do not easily *know* nature, or even ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (v)

This is how Snyder chose to introduce a body of "nature" poetry that spans over three decades, and even in the introduction, the ecopoetic attention to the link between understanding the self and nature is apparent. Snyder's poetry is only able to make these kinds of connections in powerful ways because of his commitment to actual experience. Speaking of his use of nature and animal symbols in his poetry, he once said

> Maybe it's unimaginative of me, but if I don't have a ground of actual physical experience I don't make reference to it, if I can help it, in almost any area. I don't invent things out of my head unless it is an actual

> experience—like seeing a bear in a dream, this is a true mode of seeing a bear. (*Real* 20)

Ecopoetry and ecopoetics thus have a grounding in "actual physical experience" which enables the community to experience a poetry that is authentic or perhaps trustworthy, rather than just poems about the good old days of primal cultures, incense and ecotopia. The ecopoet works as a living reminder of the interdependency of all life in the ecosystem. While speaking at a seminar at The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Snyder said

> I am a poet. My teachers are other poets, American Indians, and a few Buddhist priests in Japan. The reason I am here is because I wish to bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency. I wish to be a spokesman for a realm that is not usually represented either in intellectual chambers or in the chambers of government. (*Turtle* 106)

So, for Snyder, the poet is not just a "symbolic" representative of nature, but actually strives to be a spokesperson for wilderness. Environmental advocates may fight for the preservation or conservation of wilderness or ecosystems, but such struggles are often in the interest of human utility rather than attempts to articulate the voice of these other peoples living in the ecosystem. The ecopoet works with the community or tribe to be a voice from the wilderness. In an interview with Gene Fowler, Snyder described how his poetry functions in this sense:

> My poems, on one level, call the society's attention to its ecological relationships in nature, and to its relationships in the individual

> consciousness. Some of the poems show how society doesn't see its position in nature. What are we going to do with this planet? It's a problem of love; not the humanistic love of the West—but a love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it. Without this love, we can end, even without war, with an uninhabitable place. (*Real* 4)

When doing the actual work of poetry, the ecopoet has the same tools as any other poet: language and form. The work of exploring relationships with nature and consciousness, if it is to become a poem, will eventually have to use language and form to walk "the edge between what can be said and what cannot be said . . . the ones that make your hair stand on edge are the ones that are right on the line" (*Real* 21).

In "Poetry and the Primitive" Snyder states of poetry, "it should not have to be said, is not writing or books" and this sentiment is in keeping with his thoughts on poetry as having local significance through readings that spring up from individual communities (*Earth* 124). However, Snyder has been quite successful as a "book" poet, having published nine volumes of poetry. For an ecopoet who works on a bioregional level, this effort would seem to be above and beyond the call of duty, but his international reputation has also given him the opportunity to send his ecological message throughout the cultures that are the primary targets of his criticism. His criticism is not that of a wild-eyed, finger-wagging tree-hugger. As a poet with a large audience, he has been exceptionally successful due to the careful attention he pays to the levels in which his poems operate:

> I write lyrical poems which are shorter and which are pretty easy to understand on one level. I like to write poems that have at least one level that people can get into right away such as those in *Riprap* and *The Back Country*. The other type is that which I did in *Myths & Texts* and which I am doing in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* which is more on the order of working with myths and symbols and ideas. Working with old traditions and insights. (*Real* 20)

As he works with "old traditions and insights," there has also been a search for meaningful form. In "Some Yips & Barks in the Dark," a statement written in 1966 and later included in *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, published in 1969, Snyder explained: "It is a mistake to think that we are searching, now, for 'new forms.' What is needed is a totally new approach to the very idea of form. Why should this be? The future can't be seen on the basis of the present; and I believe mankind is headed someplace else" (358). Although the last cryptic statement could be taken as optimism or pessimism, his thoughts toward form demonstrate his concern that form must be adaptable to the constant *becoming* of culture. In the radio interview transcribed for *Bread & Poetry*, Snyder clarifies his thoughts about the applicability of old forms:

> . . . the old forms just don't work anymore for us and that we are working toward something new. . . . But we're finding—*feeling* our way into something that is not clearly established, and maybe it never will be, but the demands of poetry now are different than they've been in the past, and to try to write in the traditional modes of poetry is to bend something

> around where it won't work anymore. . . . But the poetical experience at different times and different places seems to demand a different form, and to try to take what is the pure poetical experience and throw it into iambic pentameters is to maim it. (22-24)

Snyder does acknowledge that there are times and places for traditional rhythms, and he even borrows from traditional poetics of other cultures. However, it seems that when a poet takes on the task of promoting new ways of perceiving the earth, perhaps new approaches to form are vital.

For Snyder this new approach to form has been based on two models. One is the ecological or bioregional paradigm which emphasises organic relationships between all participants in the ecosystem, watershed, and biosphere. He referred to this emphasis in an interview with Ekbert Fass: "I think of form in terms of biological forms . . . about what form is and how form changes. Form is always moving and adaptive and always has a function" (Fass 125). Another model is based on the Buddhist concept of interdependence and fragmentation which is the principle force behind koans and haiku. These two models are closely related and in fact spring from similar ways of looking at the earth. In the same interview, Fass asked Snyder to discuss the issue of interdependence and fragmentation in poetry:

> Okay. There are two things. One is, say, a fragmented text which appears fragmented and which is fragmented and which leads nowhere. Another is the ideogrammic method, a fragmented text which appears fragmented but actually leads you somewhere because the relationships that are

> established between the fragments express a deeper level of connectedness, which becomes clear to the reader's mind if he [sic] is able to follow it. We have phony obscurity and we have obscurity which serves to communicate. Two differences. The ideogrammatic method is intended as a method of communication in the sense of juxtaposing apparently unrelated things that show the connections automatically. That, of course, is what I'd have in mind in my work. Not that I want to make fragmented form, but that I want to make a whole form. (133-134).

These connections that exist in spite of the surface fragmentation parallel the interrelatedness of the biosphere. Form and content are thus joined in a manner that is a mark of great poetry, ecological or otherwise. And this form is adaptive to different circumstances, as in the differences between his goals for his short poetry and long poetry. How this form works out in specific poems is a project too large to take on in this chapter, but a look at a few of Snyder's ecopoetical poems will demonstrate some ways in which he is attempting to make these kinds of connections between his understandings of ecology and human consciousness.

I discusses two of Snyder's well known ecopoetical poems, "Riprap," and "How Poetry Comes to Me," in earlier chapters, although I did not emphasise the ecopoetic in these poems at the time. Each describes poetry in terminology that is grounded in direct experience of the wild. In "Riprap," the poem is figured as a riprap, or a cobble of rocks and stones which helps horses and pack animals move over difficult terrain. In "How Poetry Comes to Me," poetry is described as a creature that hovers just outside the light

of a campfire. The poet must go to the edge of the light to meet the poem. In "Riprap," the poet is a word-smith who practices a craft, but in "How Poetry Comes to Me" the poet appears to be a shaman or someone on a vision quest. Each of these versions of the poet fit Snyder's poetics well, for he frequently emphasizes the importance of craft, but just as often he admits that anything that the poet can say is given to the poet in moments of solitude.

Another frequently cited ecopoetical poem of Snyder's is "What You Should Know to be a Poet," from *Regarding Wave* (40). The first few stanzas are not too surprising:

> all you can about animals as persons.
> the names of trees and flowers and weeds.
> names of stars, and the movements of the planets
> and the moon.
> your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind.
> at least one kind of traditional magic:
> divination, astrology, the *book of changes*, the tarot;
> dreams.
> the illusory demons and illusory shining gods;

So far, this sounds like a class assignment that would require nothing more than a little bit of research and a few attempts at meditation and breathing exercises. Snyder here emphasizes animals, plants, the planets, the senses, the mind, magic, dreams, demons and

gods. This could describe countless poets and poetries. What follows, however, is a bit more disturbing:

kiss the ass of the devil and eat shit;

fuck his horny barbed cock,

fuck the hag,

and all the celestial angels

and maidens perfum'd and golden—

How many poets would be willing to take on this lovely task? The poet must embrace ugliness and penetrate it. What is this ugliness? The line that precedes ("the illusory demons and illusory shining gods") and the line that follows this stanza--

& then love the human: wives husbands and friends

--shed some light upon it. After the poet says it is necessary to know the "illusory" demons and gods there is a description of *how* the poet should get to know these demons and gods. This is set up as a prerequisite for loving "the human." The ugliness could be the restrictions that religion places on our understanding of ourselves and the world, or it could be an ugliness within the human experience, within the human species.

H□☿nnighausen, in "Ecopoetical Poetry," refers to this as the "sinister side of the human psyche," including "magic, illusory demons an gods, the blasphemous and degrading sex of devil worship and the tinsel angels of pop art," which he explains must be the subject of poetry, just as the "elegance of mind" which characterizes the knowledge of the first section of this poem (254). Whether Snyder was envisioning the sex of devil worship or "tinsel angels of pop art" is unclear, and perhaps this is a stretch.

However these are representative of the "creations" of humans that are disturbing and degrading. If these elements are left out of the poetic endeavor they will not likely be brought up in any other forum. As a part of the poetic endeavor, are they explored in order to be dismantled, or are they merely embraced as being a part of human existence? The latter represents a holistic veiw which requires that we embrace all—the beautiful and the ugly. In his essay, "Imagination's Body and Comradely Display," Clayton Eschleman argues that the poet explores this "sinister side" in order to be free of its illusions and then to be to return from this experience to "love the human" (234). Of course such exploration is dangerous, but the last lines of the poem suggest that this too is part of poetic knowledge:

> real danger. gambles. and the edge of death.

But between this last line and the "sinister" passage, the poet also mentions other types of knowledge:

> children's games, comic books, bubble-gum,
> the weirdness of television and advertising.

This stanza juxtaposes two knowledges that consumer culture often ignores. Adults often lose touch with the pastimes of children and the joys of those hours, and as much television as individuals in our culture watch, are television or advertising ever considered "weird" anymore? The poet must connect with that weirdness. But the poet must also know the everyday:

> work, long dry hours of dull work swallowed and accepted
> and livd with and finally lovd. exhaustion,

hunger, rest.

And with the everyday, the poet will pursue community knowledge and mystical knowledge:

the wild freedom of the dance, *extasy*

silent solitary illumination, *enstasy*

Enstasy emphasises the ecomystical aspect of ecopoetics. This hearkens back to the notion of poet as shaman, leader of community ritual and explorer of consciousness. As shaman, the poet takes on a life-long quest for what Snyder calls in the title of another poem "High Quality Information." This beautiful poem from *Left Out in the Rain*, describes what he has elsewhere termed the "real work":

A life spent seeking it

Like a worm in the earth,

Like a hawk. Catching threads

Sketching bones

Guessing where the road goes.

Lao-tzu says

To forget what you knew is best.

That's what I want:

To get those sights down,

Clear, right to the palce

Where they fade

Back to the mind of my times.

The same old circuitry

But some paths color-coded

Empty

And we're free to go. (130)

A lifetime of multiple perspectives are used to make guesses. The place longed for is the place where knowledge fades into the possibilities of new paradigms for the poet and for the community.

Snyder's essay "Unnatural Writing," from *A Place in Space*, is his most clear statement on ecopoetics, specifically the final section in which he gives nine points for a "New Nature Poetics":

- That it be literate—that is, nature literate. Know who's who and what's what in the ecosystem, even if this aspect is barely visible in the writing.
- That it be grounded in place—thus, place literate: informed about local specifics on both ecological-biotic and sociopolitical levels. And informed about history (social history and environmental history), even if this is not obvious in the poem.
- That it use Coyote as a totem—the Trickster, always open, shape shifting, providing the eye of other beings going in and out of death, laughing with the dark side.

- That is use Bear as a totem—omnivorous, fearless, without anxiety, steady, generous, contemplative, and relentlessly protective of the wild.
- That it find further totems—this is the world of nature, myth, archetype, and ecosystem that we must each investigate. "Depth ecology."
- That it fear not science. Go *beyond* nature literacy into the emergent new territories in science: landscape ecology, conservation biology, charming chaos, complicated systems theory.
- That it go further with science—into awareness of the problematic and contingent aspects of the so-called objectivity.
- That it study mind and language—language as wild system, mind as wild habitat, world as a "making" (poem), poem as a creature of the wild mind.
- That it be crafty and get the work *done*. (171-172)

These nine points summarize much of the major poetic statements Snyder made from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s. If these same points can be appropriated for an understanding of ecopoetics, then it is clear that the poetics of ecological poetry is not concerned with any particular form, nor is it merely a set of aesthetic principles. Ecopoetics is the set of principles that is *not* a set of principles because, according to Snyder's definition of the poem as "creature of the wild mind," there can be no rigid forms or principles imposed from the outside. If there are any forms or principles, they will be apparent in the grain of the wood. They will spring from the wilderness of the

mind that is aware of its interdependence upon the place and community in which it resides.

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The relationship of the self to the biosphere in Snyder's poetry also points toward a spiritual experience that can be called ecomysticism, by which I mean the space where new ecological paradigms and mystical understandings of the world overlap. Ecomysticism goes beyond mysticisms that describe a spiritual being longing for supernatural experience while being "unfortunately" trapped in a physical body. Ecomysticism emphasizes the spiritual and physical interrelatedness or interconnectedness of all matter, the human and the more-than-human.

The integration of the spiritual and physical aspects of the self is only possible through an awareness of the interrelatedness of the self and the non-human. New paradigms for the self are thus central to ecopoetics, a poetics that seeks to heal the rift between humans and the biosphere.